

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

1

Interstate 75 North

Atlanta

10:45 P.M.

A clear night as the stars twinkled high above the masses. Ignored by most except those who glanced up for whatever reason, Philip Reddinger had a reason as he sat beside the driver.

The atmosphere of the Earth. Layers of gases known as air surrounded the world and held in place by the Earth's gravity protected the planet's inhabitants. Beyond the shape of its atmosphere lay outer space, the home of various natural celestial bodies and artificial objects.

Mysteries of the universe. The unknown. But not all outer space possessed unsolved enigmas. He didn't serve one, but he believed that a God existed that created man with intellect, imagination and intuition. In addition, this God made man with free will, personal choices to decide his destiny with or without His divine help. Some people lived within the laws that governed societies around the globe. Others lived independently of those laws and engaged in the cycle of sowing and reaping. Forces in place in the world mete justice against those lawbreakers of sowing and reaping. But sometimes at an exorbitant cost. On tonight, from the far reaches of space, that collision was in motion. Philip Reddinger's plans made sure of that.

Midtown Atlanta

Interstate 75 South

11:00 P.M.

The black BMW 6-series Gran Coupe motored the highway at sixty-five miles per hour. It darted amongst the drivers of every make and model of car, van, SUV, and truck.

The BMW's driver exited off I-75 South onto Howell Mill Road. He continued south on it and viewed his rearview mirror. A series of violent coughs almost jerked the car off into others before him and in the adjacent lanes headed north. With wincing and a cleared throat, he steered the Bimmer back on course again before he viewed out the rear and side view mirrors with as much stealth as possible.

He passed DeFoor and Chattahoochee Avenues along West Atlanta. The BMW zipped best it could as it passed the Atlanta City Water Works Reservoir that rested on both sides of Howell Mill Road. He studied his rearview again.

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He saw them.

A pair of white nondescript vans fifty feet back held his attention. At the intersection of Howell Mill and Hemphill Avenue, the motorist cut a sharp left onto Hemphill with three unique streets paths from which to choose.

He looked at his rearview once more and darted the BMW to the far-left lane and punched the gas. With a roar, the sports performance vehicle followed a small semi-circle of a path with a dead-end street to its left. The driver dismissed that way and floored it along the same stretch of road before he cut a quick left and sailed along the curved road for another few seconds. It ended with a decision to drive left or right onto Bishop Place. He had no choice since to the left presented another dead-end road. He eased the BMW out onto Bishop to the right. Nothing behind him. Warehouses dominated the scene. In seconds, he halted again.

Which way onto 17th Street? If he drove left, he'd run into Howell Mill Road where he traveled last. No, he sped up and took the right turn onto 17th.

The driver passed a section of the Reservoir again, heading east back toward Midtown and where he wanted to finish his destination. He smiled before the uncontrolled coughs took center stage. Amidst the traffic as he passed the Northside Drive intersection, he spotted at least one of the white vans stopped at the Bishop Place/17th Street intersection. He ceased to smile at that and as the traffic lights gave him favor; he zipped around the wide circled S-shaped road southbound. A quick right onto Mecal Street sent the Bimmer due south for a few blocks, and in a matter of moments, it passed a news station on its right and a restaurant on its left.

He was here. But so were they, he thought. A flash of white that hadn't belonged to a car caught his rearview. He wasn't sure if it was a van. He turned right onto 14th in a quick and as quiet way as possible. In the mini blur, he passed up a mosque, an urgent care, a gas station, a big golf course, and then his eyes went wide.

At the 14th Street and McMillan Street crossing, he zipped in with a smooth right turn... security gate and intercom call box.

Was there over one though?

This seemed like the sole access. He coughed several more times. This time blood came from his mouth. He fell against the steering wheel horn which pierced the busy Atlanta night life for several seconds. He grabbed ahold of himself. Walkers jogged to help him, but he waved them off with a weakened smile and nod. They returned them and left him to his own devices. As his eyes watered and breathing challenged, he perused the call box numbers. After a few seconds, jackpot. Call box for apartment number 509.

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

2

Midtown Lofts @ 14th Street

525 14th Street

#509

Atlanta

11:00 P.M.

The Midtown Lofts housed 240 one, two, and three-bedroom loft units near the intersection of 14th Street and Northside Drive in Northeast Atlanta. North of the Georgia Tech campus, and just south of the Atlanta City Water Works Reservoir compound, the young complex granted easy access to Interstates 75 and 85 North and South.

Malcolm relaxed on his black leather recliner before his massive 75" HDTV flat screen mounted at a two-wall intersection. His recent suspension from the APD X-Men Homicide Squad still settled in his stomach like spoiled buttermilk. Yeah, his spirit, and soul hadn't felt much comfort either. Precinct grapevine said a fair number of fellow cops loved the fact that he decked his underling, one Detective Orlando Queen, *sir*. Many agreed Queen mouthed off too much, and the time passed that somebody buttoned it. Cops even supported his toe-to-toe with Police Chief Davis. On her way out after a majority of the APD revolted because of dissatisfaction with pay and benefits, his colleagues praised his stance in setting her straight. The confrontation had nothing to do with pay and benefits, but that majority backed his play just the same. Truth told Mayor Ronald Fleming harbored the blame as well spurred on by an increased ego that believed the city of Atlanta revolved around everything Fleming. He and Davis over time became a bad combination. Big city power politics at its worse.

Then to top that, his inferiors and superiors alike supported the Blue Flu epidemic. God only knew what that posturing generated in the coming days, weeks, and months. As for his team, the X-Men, well, one for all and all for one. They took time off and left the state to visit family and friends. He wanted to go somewhere, but no. He kept his eyes out for his city. Crazy as it sounded and where his situation landed him today, he believed he owed Atlanta. Maybe not so much Chief Davis, but yeah, the city. So, he wasn't bored but getting more comfortable with a lack of homicides to solve and to supervise. No personality clashes and—his call box intercom buzzed.

He moseyed over to his landline phone that rested upon his computer desk between a pair of thick white columns that separated the living, dining, and his

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computer room. His cell charged next to it. He dressed in a tight dark blue sweatshirt and matching pants with white Nike sneakers. Despite his temporary unemployment from the APD, he hadn't stopped his workout regimen. At a thick and pleasing to his eye and others, six-foot, two-hundred and ten pounds, he still presented an imposing figure to any lawbreakers. He pressed the intercom button.

"Hello?" He heard breathing but nothing else.

"Hello, is anyone there?" Silence. "Okay, let me inform you I'll call the--"

"Police, considering the citywide *strike per se*?"

"Who is this?"

"Why call the police when--" interrupted coughs "you are the police, Homicide Sergeant Malcolm Xavier Hobbs?"

**Metropolitan Parkway, Manford Road, and
Dill Avenue Intersection
S.W. Atlanta
11:00 P.M.**

Traffic breezed by in all directions, and the African-American area thrived with night life from its constituents. Made up of lower income black businesses of the mom and pop variety, with a franchise store here and there, most to all of them sat closed for the day.

African-American WSB-TV Channel 2 field reporter Yolonda Owens held a microphone as she stood on a sidewalk at the intersection of Metropolitan and Manford. In her mid-thirties, Owens graced the Mecca of the South's airwaves for the past six years as a field reporter and news anchor for the station. Competent in her industry, headhunters often handled calls from not only Atlanta rival news outlets, be it TV, radio or even newspaper, but also by other top fifteen to twenty markets around the country.

Behind her a bit was the WSB news van, camera personnel and other technicians for recording the field shots. They all stationed along a parking area on Manford before the clean, modern design of the Metropolitan Library.

A little distance from the sign that designated the building along Metropolitan Parkway, Owens, and the camera personnel framed a waist-high two-shot with...

"Chief Davis you've stated that despite your officers staging what many call, 'Blue Flu', you stand by the belief that the city of Atlanta remains safe for the citizens to go about their daily business."

Over ten years on the job as Atlanta's Top Cop, the late forties African-American woman donned her sharp and pressed blue uniform with gold trim along the shoulders. She ballooned the city's force to 2,000 officers a few years ago, but now she faced a major crisis.

"That's correct, Yolonda. My officers understand that the people of Atlanta's safety is priority number one and have committed to executing whatever legal means necessary to protect our city. Violators of the law will meet swift justice via warnings, arrests and force if needed, much like the Atlanta Police Department has always done. Despite the grapevine noise of a 'Blue Flu', the APD carries on with its usual business."

"And that's why we're here in Southwest Atlanta on Metropolitan Parkway to prove that Atlanta remains a city protected by the more than competent men and

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

women of law enforcement. Reporting from the Metropolitan Library with Chief of Police Harriet Davis, I'm Yolonda Owens for WSB."

An "And cut" from off screen relaxed everyone.

"Let's check playback for a few segments, Chief Davis."

"Sounds good."

A shortened sojourn to the WSB van for them and confirmation that all's well.

"Thank you again, Chief Davis."

"Thank you, Yolonda. I think this can and will reassure the city that APD is on the job and they're safe. Thanks again."

They exchanged handshakes as the TV crew packed the gear. Davis' personal detail, four business suited gentlemen, escorted her a scant distance to a black and tinted windowed SUV. In seconds, they left.

"All right, troops. Let's get back to the station and edit this piece for the eleven o'clock tomorrow. Excellent job, everyone," Yolonda said.

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Midtown Lofts @ 14th Street

525 14th Street #509

Living Room

Atlanta

11:02 P.M.

Malcolm froze. He didn't recognize the voice. No one familiar in the APD, anyway. No family members. He wouldn't play any games with this nut he guaranteed that.

"Listen, I can have cops here in minutes. If you know who I am, that's the truth. Who are you and what do you want like yesterday or this conversation's done got it?"

He waited as several more coughs pounded the phone's speaker.

"You're right. Time's running out. It's Milian. Jorge Alejandro Milian. AKA, J.A.M."

"Jorge—" Malcolm stopped. Did he hear right? *Jorge Alejandro Milian...* Jorge... J.A.M. Humph. He jogged away from the desk setup and phone toward his bedroom.

"Malcolm?... Malcolm, cold gotcha feet frozen in place?... Hello?... I know about Lynette."

Malcolm snagged his Beretta M9A1 handgun from a nightstand drawer. *Lynette* frozen him in place. Okay, the guy read the papers, he watched the news, it was a national story. So, why bring her name into this cryptic conversation visit? *Milian* could be anyone. But it sounded like him on second, third, and fourth thought.

"Hobbs! Let me up, now! Or you'll regret you didn't!"

He jogged back to the phone.

"Does Lynette have anything to do with you being on my doorstep?"

"Maybe. Let me up now... please."

Milian barked a series of nasty coughs into the phone. Malcolm knew Milian came armed. Milian was well aware he was a cop and carried a piece too. No mysteries left about Lynette's murder. So, what leverage had Milian there? It benefitted the city if a man like him was on lockdown in his apartment and not creating havoc in the streets. He played this out. He carried his Beretta, a cop's intuition, and the Holy Spirit within to offset what felt like a trap.

Malcolm hit the button to buzz him.

"Come on up, J.A.M."

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

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Interstate 75 North

Atlanta

11:02 P.M.

The caravan of Executive Protection in black colored and tinted windowed SUV motored up I-75 toward downtown Atlanta and the Atlanta Public Safety Headquarters Building on the city's major artery that was Peachtree Street.

Up ahead, the SUV closed on a plain white van. A big, green, sixteen-wheeler truck cruised ahead of the van. A Mack eighteen-wheeler changed lanes from left to right and decelerated until it remained behind the SUV. After a few minutes, it signaled left and passed up the sports utility vehicle. Once by it, the massive truck signaled right again and settled in front of the SUV. Inside, Chief Davis and her personal team read documents and small talked.

The Mack truck sped ahead and increased the distance from the SUV. Behind the wheel dressed in all black sat Rudolf Schmidt. The forty-year-old blue-eyed blond man with surfer boy looks darted his head to the rearview and side mirrors for his highway company and any trouble. Now, another white courier van changed lanes to the right and traveled alongside the SUV. It signaled again to the right until in front of the SUV. This continued for several more minutes and miles.

That courier van to the right of the SUV carried two men in the driver and front passenger seats. Both men, who wore all black too, repeated glances at the SUV. The front passenger seat rider was Kim Yao Ching. The lean, quick, wiry Chinese-American in his late twenties displayed a grim countenance. He grasped a small hand-held electronic device that he placed against his side window. He pushed a few buttons on the small display screen that depicted the interiors of the SUV. Much like an x-ray image, the man scanned the bodies. Each of their skeletal systems, with moving jaws talking, dominated the images. Now, along the hips of the four occupants, the machine portrayed handguns in holsters and badges pinned on chests and hung along belts. Ching tapped the driver, Stu Connors, on the shoulder. The former British SAS Counter-terrorist Sniper threw a quickened glance at the screen. The gray-eyed blond, who responded like nails on a chalkboard when army superiors questioned his motives, joined his grim-faced collaborator.

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

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Midtown Lofts @ 14th Street

525 14th Street #509

Living Room

Atlanta

11:04 P.M.

The doorbell rang. Malcolm held his Beretta M9A1 in his right hand. He checked the peephole and witnessed, yeah; it was him. And yeah, he looked worse for wear too.

Jorge Alejandro Milian's specs? The Cuban-American approximated five-foot-ten and one-hundred sixty-pounds. In his forties, the black hair, amber complexioned, former Army Rangers Sniper experienced a checkered career. Credited with fifty confirmed kills and several medals of honor, he with some of his colleagues chucked them away some time after. They got caught up in unacceptable behavior aka maltreatment, dereliction of duty and desertion in guarding Afghan prison detainees during the Global War on Terror. Sentenced to six years, Milian served four-and-a-half with his dishonorable discharge. After that, he fell off the grid, and he hadn't heard a peep from him until tonight.

He coughed again when Malcolm wondered what kind of contagion he brought with him. Maybe this wasn't the best idea. With the 'Blue Flu' pervasive as a virus, who did he have to count on for sure? His X-Men Squad of Pepper, Orlando, Selena, and Shepard 'took a vacation' and scattered across the country. The Lord knew all things. He confessed his salvation benefits and the Full Armor of God to start the day. Plus, he wasn't any slouch with physical confrontation right, Detective Orlando Queen, sir?

He stepped back and cracked the door. Milian readied to burst through him and the barrier when Malcolm closed the gap to a narrow slit. Milian wasn't pleased.

"We're gonna do this here? Malcolm, please."

He watched Milian as he peered behind him up and down the long hallway. Was he bringing trouble aside from himself to his doorstep? Milian was correct. He wasn't doing this in the hallway. But he needed reminding of who he dealt with.

"Try anything stupid and I have no compunction about dropping you right here and right now. Understand?"

"Well, we wouldn't want that, would we? Your turf, your house, your rules, Malcolm." He hacked again with a hand to his mouth. "We need to hurry though."

Despite this feeling of danger, the peace of God which passed all understanding encompassed his spirit, soul, and body. Okay, God knew how he worked. That's a

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

green light that all's well. He stepped back and cracked the door wide. Milian fast walked inside with paranoia-like gestures.

"Are we alone?"

"Just us fellas, Milian." Malcolm closed the door as Milian noticed the weapon. That hadn't fazed him a second. He even looked too weak to raise his arms in surrender.

"You sick, Milian? If so, we can pray and believe, but I suggest you seek medical help at Grady Hospital too--"

"I want to report a murder."

Taken aback, Malcolm collected himself. "Whose?"

"Mine."

THREAT NEXUS Excerpt

7

Interstate 75 North

Atlanta

11:04 P.M.

Schmidt sped up the eighteen-wheeler to over seventy-five miles per hour and signaled right to front the green big rig. The passenger side rider's hand signaled for Schmidt to slow down the Mack. As the truck slowed its speed down, that slowed the green sixteen-wheeler. The first white courier van that trailed the green sixteen-wheeler reduced its speed. It remained behind that same truck.

The SUV cruised I-75 North with no issues as small talk continued. Then multiple explosions rocked the vehicle. Both right side tires exploded. The SUV veered right toward the nearest courier van. That van decelerated as the SUV swerved with herky-jerky motions. Continued thumping and thudding of the destroyed rubber wore down to the rims. The road kissed those rims and the contact replicated a hundred fireworks sparklers exhibition.

Nearby cars cleared paths for the SUV to reach the shoulder of the road. Both white vans blared horns and the Mack eighteen-wheeler copied the action. By now the truck's speed diminished to about thirty miles per hour and continued to descend. The green sixteen-wheel truck driver powered down his window for the damaged SUV to steer in front of it. Now, the SUV driver controlled the hampered vehicle before the green big rig, which eased its speed down to about fifteen miles per hour.

In the front passenger side courier van, the occupant to the left of the truck caravan powered down his window and attempted to flag down that sixteen-wheeler driver. That truck driver side window descended, and the van passenger side man yelled.

"Pull over so the SUV can get to the shoulder!"

After a few seconds, the green sixteen-wheeler driver signaled right to exit onto the shoulder. Schmidt steered the Mack eighteen-wheeler in front of it and did the same. Both eased down to about ten miles per hour. The SUV slammed a guardrail that prevented it from flipping over into the surrounding forest.

The drivers of the truck caravan exited for the SUV. Both courier vans also parked on the shoulder. Their drivers exited. Other cars readied to assist but courier drivers shooed them away with waves, thumbs up, and smiles.

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“What happened, sir?” the sixteen wheeled truck driver asked. Decker, in military garb, he approached the SUV with Schmidt and saw cracked windows with brief movement.

Unbeknownst to the investigation parties, the four other riders in the two courier vans strolled up to each side of the sixteen-wheeler truck cab.

“Whoa,” the military truck driver said.

“What’s up?” Schmidt asked.

“Well, you ask me, I’d say these tires... someone shot out these tires with multiple rounds, sir.”

“Shot out? How in the world—who in the world and why?”

The military driver pulled the front passenger side door that creaked and whined with the pressure. Now Mack truck driver Schmidt peered inside.

“Ah man,” the military man said.

“What? What?”

“The tires weren’t the only things shot out, sir.”

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