

TARGETS ^{OF} DECEPTION

ADVANCE READERS COPY

JEFFREY STEPHENS



Copyright © 2009 Jeffrey Stephens
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and should not be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For more information e-mail all inquiries to: tpaulschulte@variancepublishing.com

ISBN: 1-935142-12-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-935142-12-6

Published by Variance LLC (USA).

www.variancepublishing.com

Interior by Stanley Tremblay
Cover by Jeremy Robinson
www.jeremyrobinsononline.com

TARGETS OF DECEPTION

VX is a substance developed in Great Britain in 1952 and remains the deadliest nerve gas ever created. VX - known by its United States Army codename - is a clear, colorless liquid with the consistency of motor oil. A fraction of a drop of VX, absorbed through the skin or inhaled through aeration, can kill by severely disrupting the nervous system. Although a cocktail of drugs can serve as an antidote, VX acts so quickly that victims would have to be injected with the antidote almost immediately to have a chance at survival. VX is the only significant nerve agent created since World War II. VX is a weapon of mass destruction that spreads from impact point killing all in its path

...

Foxnews.com

cfrterrorism.org

chem.ox.ac.uk

TARGETS OF DECEPTION



CHAPTER ONE

Jordan Sandor had no reason to expect this quiet autumn morning to erupt with the familiar sounds of his violent past.

It was nearly ten. The air felt crisp and cool, the calm sky bright and clear and blue. The two-lane blacktop in upstate New York was deserted, except for Dan Peters' old station wagon where Sandor slouched in the passenger seat, a casual observer of the passing countryside. He and Peters had been riding in silence when a pickup truck came into view, then turned across their path.

"That's practically a traffic jam around here."

Sandor nodded. "Doesn't seem to be much doing."

"Nope, not this time of year. Summer you get the tourists, hiking, camping, and all that. Winter, they come up to ski." Peters eased the wagon along a wide curve. "Fall, some people drive up on the weekends to see the leaves turn color. Other than that you get nothing."

They passed a makeshift billboard that boasted authentic home cooking at some nearby restaurant. The poster looked so old Sandor wondered whether the restaurant even existed anymore. "You don't miss the city at all?"

Peters thought it over, surveying the barren road. "Sometimes. The places, you know. Not the people. The food, mostly. When I get a taste for good Chi-

JEFFREY STEPHENS

nese or Thai, and especially Japanese, that's when I really miss New York. No Sushi Yasuda up here."

Sandor smiled at the road ahead. "Still need your sushi fix."

"Old habits die hard."

"You were the one convinced me to try it, remember? Raw fish! Man, how many years ago was that?"

Peters didn't answer.

"Well," Jordan said after another mile or so, "I give you high marks. Looks like you've done a good job of making the transition to the quiet life."

"Quiet everywhere, except up here," Peters said, pointing to his head. Embarrassed by the confession, he fell silent again.

"You're entitled to some peace," Jordan told him.

"What I saw over there . . ." Dan paused, "it never gets peaceful for me. Sometimes I manage to ignore the noise, that's all."

The two men had fought together in the Gulf War, the first one, when they drove the Iraqis out of Kuwait, leaving behind a mess that needed to be cleaned up a dozen years later. Before that, Peters saw duty in Vietnam. He had been a career soldier and, although he was nearly fifteen years older than Sandor, Jordan outranked him when they served in the Persian Gulf.

"Well," Sandor said, "maybe peace and quiet are overrated."

"Yeah, tranquility is a bitch," Peters said, then uttered a short laugh. "So what about you? How do you like your new gig? What are you supposed to be, a reporter or something?"

"I'm a journalist, if you don't mind."

"Oh yeah, a journalist, beautiful. You talk about transition, man. I suppose you don't miss the good fight, eh?"

Sandor faced forward again. He had an uneven nose, earned in too many close order scuffles, and a jaw line etched in a strong, firm line. His complexion was tanned and a bit weathered for a man not yet forty. His hair was brown and cut just long enough to allow him to run his fingers through the waves, front to back, which he habitually did when he took time to consider a question or reflect on something that troubled him. He was doing that now, his dark, intense eyes visualizing something beyond his actual line of sight. "I gave up the good fight the day they left my men for dead in Bahrain."

"Yeah," Peters said as shook his head. "Bastards."

After his tour in the Middle East, Dan returned home to finish his military career stateside, take his pension and disappear. Jordan remained abroad, working on special assignments until an undercover team he was assigned to in Man-

TARGETS OF DECEPTION

ama was betrayed. It had been more than a year since that incident in Bahrain. The day after they pulled him out and left the others behind to die, Sandor submitted his resignation from government service.

“Not everyone comes home.”

Jordan nodded.

“Strange, how things never work out the way you figure.”

Jordan let that go too. “So what about this Ryan guy we’re going to see?”

“What about him?”

“What does he think of the quiet life, now that he’s back?”

“You’re the journalist, you ask him.”

“I will,” Sandor said.

Peters rolled down his window, letting a cold breeze whip through the car.

“If this guy was really a mercenary,” Jordan said, “he’s got some explaining to do before I’ll believe a thing he tells me.”

Peters turned to his old friend and showed him a crooked grin. “Good old Jordan, Mr. Black and White. The mercenary business is immoral because you play for money. But if you put the same guy in a uniform, underpay him and send him out to shoot someone, that makes it okay.”

Sandor shook his head.

“You sure know how to wave the flag, buddy.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Jordan said. “Flag’s not the problem.”

Morning sunlight sparkled on the trees, an October spectacle of colors lining the road as they continued on Route 32 towards Jimmy Ryan’s house.

“Close your window, will you Dan?”

Peters chuckled as he put it up half way. He was a burly man with wide shoulders and thick arms. “Blood a little thin these days, Sandor? Winter’s coming, you know. Time to bulk up.” He patted his ample stomach, evidence that he no longer bothered with the physique he maintained while he was in military service.

Sandor, who was still trim and fit, eyed his friend’s gut. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll pass on the donuts and put on my jacket instead.” He grabbed his sport coat from the back seat, pulled in on and rubbed his hands together.

“So how well do you really know him?”

“Jimmy? I told you, I only met him last month, when he first got back from Europe.”

“I thought you said he was in North Africa.”

“He was. Spent some time in France before he came back to the States.”

“Uh huh. And how’d he find his way to you?”

JEFFREY STEPHENS

“I met him in a bar.”

“Picking up guys in bars, Danny?”

“Very cute.”

“You still a Budweiser man?”

“Loyal to the end. You still going steady with Jack Daniels?”

“Ever faithful.”

Danny laughed.

“You think he was looking for you, or was it just a coincidence?”

“Looking for me? I don’t think so. We were watching a ballgame, talking bullshit, found out we were both in the Army, started gabbing about it. Save the third degree for him, will you? We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Just curious. Occupational hazard.”

“I see. New occupation, new hazards. I think I liked you better in the desert.”

Peters slowed down as they approached an intersection and swung into a left turn that led them onto another two lane road. It was a narrower stretch than Route 32, but just as quiet—until a sharp *crack* rang out through the clear morning air.

“What the hell was that?” Even as Dan asked the question, they heard a second explosion ring out, the sound unmistakable.

“Gunshots,” Sandor replied flatly.

“There’s no hunting this close to 32,” Dan said.

“That didn’t come from any hunting rifle. Those are low velocity rounds.”

As they rounded the next curve they saw, just ahead and off to their left, two cars stopped on the grass shoulder. One was a police car, the other a sedan parked in front of the cruiser. Beside the driver’s door of the sedan an officer had fallen to the ground in a leaden heap.

Dan instinctively jammed on his brakes, tires screeching as the station wagon shuddered to a halt fifty yards from the two cars.

Jordan hollered a warning as a small, dark man jumped from the passenger side of the sedan and leveled an automatic pistol at them. “Move it!” he shouted. “Go!”

Dan was pulling at the column gearshift, about to throw the wagon in reverse when the first shot smashed through the windshield, covering them in a spray of fractured glass. The second round tore into Dan’s right side, piercing him with the awful, numbing sensation of jagged ice slicing through his flesh, then giving way almost at once to a searing shock of pain. Peters lurched backward from the impact then slumped forward onto the steering wheel. His foot slipped from the brake and the station wagon rolled slowly ahead towards the approaching gun-

TARGETS OF DECEPTION

man.

As Jordan dove below the level of the dashboard a third shot exploded through what remained of the windshield, showering them again with broken shards of safety glass. He struggled to pull his friend out of the line of fire, keeping himself as low as he could manage, even as another round whistled above him and went crashing through the side window. The car was still moving forward, now no more than thirty yards from their assailant.

Another shot sounded.

“Sonuva—”

Crack!

Sandor managed to yank Dan down, pulling him off the steering column onto the seat. Kicking his friend’s feet out of the way, he slammed down on the accelerator, the car surging forward with a surprising burst of power. He grabbed the wheel and tried to hold a steady course but careened wildly to the right. Jordan knew that if he ran them off the road they would be finished, so he tugged slightly to the left, judging his position with the help of a quick look above the dash. Making several reflexive adjustments, swerving left and then right, Sandor was nearly even with the two parked cars when he veered sharply left again, causing the gunman to jump backward, out of the car’s path as the wagon sped past. The shooter quickly regained his balance and fired again, the bullet crashing through the rear window, sending more glass cascading across the back seat.

Jordan heard yelling in some foreign language as he reached up to tilt the rear view mirror for a look behind.

The driver of the sedan had gotten out of the car and was waving his arms. It appeared he was ordering his companion back inside. He was tall and blond, as dissimilar in appearance from the short, swarthy gunman as he could have been.

Jordan remained low, peering just above the dash now, keeping the pedal pinned to the floor, doing the best he could to put some distance between his car and theirs and wondering how he was going to survive a high speed chase, driving from the passenger seat with Dan Peters’ bleeding body on top of him.

Several more shots popped behind them as he headed down the long, straight stretch of road. When it seemed the firing had finally stopped he checked the mirror again, surprised to see that the two men were not turning around to pursue him. Instead, they had hurried back into their car and were speeding off in the other direction, towards the main highway.

He watched as they disappeared around the curve from where he and Dan had first spotted them. Sandor knew they might spin a turn and come back after him, but he brought Dan’s wagon to an abrupt stop and threw the gearshift into

JEFFREY STEPHENS

park. If they were returning, he would have no chance to outrun them unless he got behind the wheel.

“Dan, can you hear me?” He tried to raise him.

“My side,” Peters muttered. “I’m hit bad.”

“I know,” Jordan told him, relieved to have him say anything at all. “Can you move?”

Dan nodded slightly and Jordan checked behind them again, making sure the sedan did not suddenly roar back into view, then helped Peters slide to the middle of the seat and scrambled over him to get behind the wheel. He turned to have another look back, but there was no sign of them. Not yet.

Sandor turned back to his friend and, seeing the growing stain of blood running onto the seat amidst the broken glass, pulled off his jacket, folded it up and placed it under Peters’ head.

“Here,” he said, grabbing Dan’s parka from the back seat of the car and shaking it free of glass fragments, “hold this against your side. Hold it tight.”

Jordan shifted the car into reverse, completed a high speed turn, then sped back to the police cruiser. The sudden stop drew a groan from his friend. There was still no sign of an ambush. Jordan watched and listened intently but heard nothing except the hum of the station wagon’s engine through the empty frame where the windshield had been. The quiet was eerie now, unsettling after the explosion of gunfire, the shattering of glass and the wailing of tires that had resounded along this desolate strip of roadway. Sandor, now aware of the pounding in his chest, took a deep breath to steady himself before stepping quickly from the wagon. He ran around the front and knelt beside the wounded officer.

“Can you hear me?”

He gave no response, but Jordan checked for a pulse along his carotid artery. He was still alive.

Sandor removed the pistol from the trooper’s holster, which he found was still snapped shut. All the while he kept returning his anxious gaze ahead, searching for what might appear without warning from around the turn. He pulled at the slide of the officer’s automatic and drew a round into the breech, then climbed into the police cruiser, picked up the radio mike and spoke into the open channel.

“We have an emergency. Officer down, just off Route 32. Repeat, officer down, emergency.”

He released the button on the side of the microphone, waiting only an instant before a voice crackled over the speaker, and Jordan knew that for now, at least, it would be all right.

TARGETS OF DECEPTION



CHAPTER TWO

Sandor was finally alone, seated on a vinyl sofa in the waiting area of the local hospital. He had spent the day being subjected to the repetitive questions of a preliminary police interrogation, treated to a series of medical updates on Dan Peters and the wounded officer, and praised for his courage by a seemingly endless stream of strangers.

The wounded trooper, Jack Collins, was in the intensive care unit. He had only survived, according to all accounts, because of Jordan's quick reaction under fire. Dan was also out of surgery, patched up and resting quietly in the recovery room.

"Unbelievably lucky," the surgeon had explained to Jordan. "I can't begin to tell you how close this was to a lethal injury. They just missed his spine, his heart . . ."

Wincing at the lousy cup of coffee in his hand, Jordan said with a smile, "I didn't know Danny had a heart." He was hoping to be spared further torment, but the doctor would not be deterred. He described all the gruesome details of Peters' surgery before Jordan could get away and spend a few moments on his own.

Just as he settled into that reverie, he heard someone say his name.

JEFFREY STEPHENS

He slowly raised his head to see a broad, stern-looking man wearing a state trooper's uniform and a chest full of medals. "Yes."

"I'm Captain Reynolds," the man said, his speech as stiff as his posture. "Jack Collins is one of my men."

Sandor stood, his lean frame of just over six feet tall bringing him eye to eye with the trooper. "Jordan," he said, offering his hand as he made a quick assessment of this authoritarian old cop.

Captain Reynolds looked like one of the tough, leathery, career officers Sandor had served under, certainly a man who had experienced his share of fighting in the military. Now, years later, his weary, grey eyes said he had spent too much time in a rural area, chasing after too many drunk drivers and too many petty criminals, no longer seeing any real action. His glory days were long gone.

Reynolds' grip was firm, and he held Jordan's hand as if he didn't mean to let go. "They tell me you saved Jack's life."

"Bit of an exaggeration, I think."

"I'm not so sure. If you left him there, doctor says he would have bled to death as easily as anything else. You took a real chance, going back for him the way you did. Could've run for it yourself, right?"

Jordan was embarrassed for about the twentieth time that afternoon and, since Reynolds was obviously not the sentimental type, he figured he should put an end to this part of the discussion as politely as he could. "Look Captain, I needed a gun, and I figured Collins had one."

Reynolds showed him as tight a smile as he'd seen in a while. It was one of those official smiles Jordan would get from a commanding officer who wanted to demonstrate his appreciation for something Sandor had done, without getting emotional about it. "That's a lotta crap," the Captain said, making the statement sound as friendly as hell. "I know a combat vet when I meet one, Sandor. You didn't go back for a gun. You went back because you were trained not to leave your men behind."

"Homework, Captain?"

"Yeah, checked up on you some. Sorry I never met you overseas. Could've used you in Nam."

"Before my time," Jordan said. Then he shrugged. "Wouldn't have mattered anyway, right?"

"Probably not." Captain Reynolds shook his head. "Buy you a real cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, but I wanted to stop by to see Collins, if I can."

Reynolds nodded. "We'll catch up a little later then. I have a few questions

TARGETS OF DECEPTION

for you.”

“Right,” Jordan said.

Reynolds stood there for a moment, just to let Sandor know who was in charge. Jordan thought about asking if he was dismissed, but Reynolds turned around, executing something close to a smart about-face, then walked away.

As Sandor strolled down the hospital corridor, it seemed everyone there recognized him. Small town, big news. He stopped at the nurse’s station where he exchanged smiles with a cute brunette sitting behind a long, white counter.

“May I see Trooper Collins now. I understand he’s feeling a little better, and I’m—”

“He’s in the ICU, Mr. Sandor,” she interrupted. “His only visitors should be immediate family. But for you,” she added with a self-conscious tilt of her head, “I’ll speak with the doctor right away.”

She lingered an extra moment to smile into Jordan’s dark eyes, then stepped inside a glass enclosed area behind her, picked up the telephone and, watching Jordan through the partition, made her call. The discussion was brief. She hung up and came back to the counter.

“Follow me,” she said.

The intensive care unit was a jungle of antiseptic technology with large, complex machinery dwarfing the patients it surrounded. Beeping sounds and audio-visual monitors animated the peaceful, yet impersonal infirmary. The nurse led Jordan through a maze of computers and stainless steel apparatus to Jack Collins bedside.

“This is Mr. Sandor,” she whispered softly, “the man who saved you.”

Jordan could have done without that introduction. “They’re the ones who saved you,” he protested mildly as he gestured toward the equipment and staff around them. “I just kept you company till they got there.” Collins looked about twenty-five, a young officer who had made a rookie’s mistake. A more experienced trooper wouldn’t have gone down that way, his gun still snapped into the holster.

Collins did his best to smile. He was rigged up to intravenous tubing, his head and neck bandaged, his complexion the color of the sheets pulled up to his

JEFFREY STEPHENS

chin. Jordan thought he looked pretty good, considering the last time he had seen him he was crumpled in a heap on the blacktop, oozing blood.

"They told me what you did," he said in a hoarse, unsteady voice. His tired eyes searched Jordan's face for something then looked past him. "Thanks."

"Seems you're already on the mend," Jordan said cheerfully. "I just wanted to stop by, see how you're doing."

The nurse, who remained at his side, said, "He's doing fine, Mr. Sandor, but he needs his rest. Just a minute or two, please."

Jordan nodded. "Right," he said, watching her slowly walk away, giving him a good look at her exit. "Nice girl," he said.

"Yeah," Collins agreed. "Grew up right nearby, in Saugerties. You're not from around here, Mr. Sandor."

"It's Jordan. And no, I'm from the city. Came up to visit an old army pal, Dan Peters. Know him?"

"Not really. Think I heard the name when he moved into town." He spoke haltingly from the combination of pain and medication. "It's been a while since anyone rented the Larsen place."

"But you never met him."

"Don't think I ever laid eyes on him." Collins blinked slowly, the drugs balancing him on the edge of sleep. "I hear they did a number on him too."

"They did."

"Captain told me. Coulda' been both of us, hadn't been for you."

"Forget it," Jordan said.

"How'd it go . . . down at the barracks?"

"The questioning, you mean? All right, I guess. I gave a description of the little guy with the automatic. I only saw the driver for a few seconds, caught a glimpse of him in the mirror."

"Driver's the one who plugged me."

"Tall blonde guy," Jordan said.

"Yeah. Captain tells me you gave a pretty good I.D. on both. License plate too. How in hell'd you manage that?"

"Instincts, that's all."

"Sure," Collins said, sounding like he was about to pass out.

"Strange looking pair, weren't they?"

Collins opened his eyes a bit. "How do you mean?"

"The little guy was Arab. The driver looked like an All-American linebacker."

"Yeah," Collins said with a slight nod. He was fading fast now.

"I wanted to ask you something, Jack. All right if I call you Jack?"

TARGETS OF DECEPTION

Collins tried to smile again, his lips dry and uneven. "Ask away."

"They tell me you stopped them for speeding. How did it happen? You give them the siren?"

"Uh huh."

"And they stopped right away?"

"Sure. Probably knew they were gonna blast me." The idea of that seemed to rouse him. "If they took off, they had to know I'd go for the radio."

Jordan nodded. That was how he figured it. "Did they say anything? Anything at all?"

Collins took a long, hard swallow. "Not a word. Sonuvabitch just nailed me." He hesitated. "I never even got my gun out of the holster."

Jordan frowned.

"Why do you ask?"

"Nothing really," Jordan said. "I just heard them yelling to each other. I thought maybe if you heard something . . ."

"Nothing." He paused again and drew a shallow, awkward breath. "Now that you mention it though . . . I thought I heard them speaking in a foreign language when I was on the ground. I wouldn't have known French from Chinese by then."

"Don't worry about it. They'll get picked up soon enough."

"The car," Collins said, his voice growing weaker as the medication was getting the best of him. "Captain said they found it."

Jordan nodded, pretending to know what he was talking about.

"Down by the reservoir. Another set of tire tracks. Second car waiting for them."

"Right," Jordan said.

"Professionals," Collins muttered.

"We were all lucky to get out of there," Sandor said.

Collins reached out and took hold of Jordan's arm. "You were the luck."

"Just one more question, then I'll let you get some rest. Know a guy up here, name of Jimmy Ryan?"

Collins started to shake his head, but it hurt too much. "No. Can't say as I do."

"Never mind." Sandor patted the man's hand and offered a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. Your boys will catch them."

Collins looked up at him in a way that told Jordan he knew it was a lie. "They knew what they were about," he said. "They're long gone, aren't they?"

"We'll see."

JEFFREY STEPHENS

The young man hesitated, then said, "Take care of yourself."
"You too," Jordan said and turned away.
Collins was asleep before he left the room.