

MONKEY TRAP

Lee Denning

Chapter 1

Jungle of Purace District, Colombia | Sunday 0505 EDT

The Assassin sat in the crotch of a tree awaiting the time his target would appear. He contemplated the full moon, cradling into the mountains to the west. To the east, the sun would be easing toward the treetop horizon, a fat glowing orange in the humid air. The artist in him admired the ethereal light of the approaching tropical dawn. Viewed from space, he was under the terminator: half the planet in darkness, half in light.

Like me, the Assassin smiled crookedly. The smile faded as his hard hands unfolded the delicate gossamer-winged angel of death. The morning birdsong of the jungle grew muted around him.

Creating the little killer drone had been complex, yet it operated so simply. He marveled again at the miniaturization and technology, proud of his part in its creation. Then he ran down the preflight checklist on his laptop computer screen.

The drone's soft feminine voice whispered confirmation in his ear:

"Wings configured.

"Power up.

"Control surfaces functional.

"Telemetry up, both directions.

"Global positioning engaged.

"Target acquisition up.

"Laser guidance operative.

"Darts armed."

The tiny laptop showed an all-green board. He disconnected the umbilical cord connecting his laptop to the killer drone and stepped out of his tree hammock onto the branch. With the foliage pushed down by his weight, the drug lord's compound became clearly visible, pocketed into a hillside over two miles away on the north side of the valley. The straight lines of the crop fields on the valley floor, and the clear fields of fire they allowed, defined the compound for what it truly was: a well-defended enclave.

The Assassin studied it carefully through his binoculars in the growing light, his soldier's training appreciating their thoroughness. He spoke into his headset microphone, ticking off key points:

"The file on security is quite accurate.

"Electronic surveillance and random roving patrols extend almost this far out.

"Physical barriers, landmines, concertina fences closer in.

"Not just your usual small arms; confirm Vulcan cannon on the Hummers.

"Armored vehicles, probably custom-built hybrids, under the camouflage netting; I can't ID.

"They have an array of heavy-caliber machine guns and rocket-grenade launchers, also under the netting.

"Both fixed and mobile antiaircraft platforms; I see four and two."

The Assassin thought back through the intelligence file he had memorized. Security run by ex-Israeli intelligence officers and former Legionnaires; criminals all, but nonetheless some of the most devious minds in their craft. Probably the latest and best technology drug money can buy, he admitted. They certainly had the best security operation in the entire drug trade, both people and equipment.

"Feeling pretty secure, are you?" he concluded the analysis. "Well, not *this* morning, and not from *me*." The threat slid out easily through his crooked smile.

The Assassin kissed the little killer drone, and pointed it toward the compound. Within seconds, it integrated its camera view with that of the high-altitude recon drone above them, solving out the global positioning equations, computing its flight path.

The drone whispered into his headset, “Object location acquired, release when ready.”

“Fly true, angel,” he blessed, and the drone slid from his hand. It lofted with delicate grace and eerie quiet eastward away from his treetop nest, taking a meandering course through the uppermost canopy of the jungle.

No one could pick up the little killer drone by instrument; even tuned radars would paint its composite materials as a small bird. No one would likely pick it up by eye; with its gossamer wings and pale colors it flew ghostlike through the skies, day or night. Even so, the Assassin guided it in from the east, keeping it in the dawn light at treetop level.

The intelligence profile said the target would appear on the balcony right at sunrise. He did—a huge, hulking, dark-skinned man, a barrel chest with a thick cover of black hair, on top of oddly short legs. The recon drone, hovering at 84,000 feet in the air ten miles east, picked him up immediately. Another marvel of technology, the recon drone was solar-powered; it could hold on-station in the stratosphere above the clouds for months or years. It had been watching the compound for the past two weeks, preparing for this moment. Now, the stereoscopic vision of its wingtip cameras transmitted an image of superb resolution to the Assassin’s laptop. Diego Corrano, *el Jefe*, was unmistakable, right down to the wart on his ugly nose.

The target Corrano started his stretches and *tai chi* on the balcony outside his bedroom, slowly working into a rhythm. That balcony also served as the box seat from which he oversaw tortures and executions from time to time, if the reports were to be believed. The Assassin had studied them all carefully, and believed them.

“Stand up nice and straight, asshole,” he smiled at the target so highly resolved on his laptop screen.

Corrano obliged, and the Assassin clicked the pointer on the image’s hairy chest. The software limned an outline around him, and held it, no matter how the man moved. A brief pause followed while the codes in both the killer drone and the recon drone ran their preloaded subroutines. *Target Confirmed* flashed on his laptop screen, and almost simultaneously the killer drone’s soft voice whispered in his ear.

“Target acquired, engage when ready.”

The Assassin scrolled to the *Execute Auto* selection, clicked on it and sat forward in his tree nest, watching the screen intently. The little killer drone folded its wings back and accelerated. Now operating under its own logic scheme, it would react faster and more reliably than his ability to control it from a distance.

Diego Corrano, *el Jefe*, undisputed leader of the world’s foremost cocaine and heroin conglomerate, stretched his arms to the tropical sky, a light sweat building on his skin. He turned east and squinted into the rising sun, unaware of the laser bead steadying down on his hairy chest. The dart followed immediately, burying itself in the hard fat and muscle under the rib cage. The strange warmth of the paralytic blanked out the minor sting of the dart almost before he could feel it. The recon drone showed his face clearly. The target stumbled, confused, as his left side went numb. A dark exultation flooded into the Assassin, hard-edged and cold. *El Jefe* screamed something into the bedroom behind him as he staggered and turned.

“Hit confirmed,” the drone’s soft whisper reported to the Assassin.

Corrano collapsed into the arms of a sunburned bald-headed man in jungle fatigues who ran from the bedroom out onto the balcony.

Aviram Glickman, the drug cartel’s security chief, from the file photos, the Assassin thought, and laughed quietly.

“Ah, well, why not? Reinforce our message.”

The little killer drone executed a steep climb away into a barrel roll for another pass. The genomic toxin, keyed to Corrano, probably wouldn’t affect Glickman much, but the paralytic would be nasty while it lasted. The Assassin scrolled to *Backup Target* and clicked on the security

chief's screen image. The software limned an outline. He bypassed the protective checks and clicked *Execute Manual*.

"No innocents in this place, Avi," he muttered as he headed the drone out of its roll and straight back toward the balcony.

The security chief pulled the dart out of a moaning Corrano, looking at it in amazement. With maybe a sense of motion in his peripheral vision, or maybe just primitive instinct, the man yanked over a table and crouched behind it, blindly firing his pistol sunward and screaming the alert into his lapel mike. It was little use: the targeting software compensated and the dart took him in the cheek.

"Manual execute hit confirmed on backup target," the drone's voice whispered. "Wing damage, implementing reverse course retrieval program."

The little killers had to be retrieved whenever possible; they were fiendishly difficult to replace. So the Assassin tracked it on his laptop, faithfully following its zig-zag programmed return path just above the treetops.

"Shit! It's only making half-speed," he muttered, "this is dangerous. Let's hope they can't see it."

His finger hovered over the *Self Destruct* command on the laptop. But he couldn't do it. The machine embodied both art and engineering of the highest order. It represented skill and knowledge and other things he once had lived for and still admired. And it was a friend, a fellow hunter, a comrade in arms, more than a machine. A predator, like him.

So he waited patiently, catching his damaged angel of death gently in his arms when it finally arrived. A message sounded instantly in his earphone, relayed from the recon drone above.

"Omega-One, Omega-One, you've been sighted. We have a scramble from the compound, three jeeps headin' south toward your position. And about one klick west we have movement toward you showin' on infrared. Maybe a foot patrol; three or four troops. Withdraw immediately. Repeat, withdraw immediately. Proceed to primary EZ and signal for rendezvous."

"Roger, understood," the Assassin replied. "Heading out. Setting angel to SDC."

He sighed and stuffed additional malleable plastique into the drone body and set it into the crotch of the tree, where its shredded wing material would be invitingly visible from the ground. He toggled the red internal microswitch labeled *Self-Destruct on Contact*. The drone would detonate thirty seconds after being moved. With any luck at all, it would take out one or more of the security troops, and make them think twice about ambushes. That should slow them down a little. He slipped the laptop computer in his weapons harness, loaded his backpack, dropped the rope and rappelled to the ground.

He ran at hard lope southward through the jungle along one of the game trails picked out and memorized earlier from the recon graphics. They couldn't track him from their helicopters under the triple canopy, and they couldn't get jeeps down the trails. But the dogs would be a different story, and thinking of that he picked up his pace. He ran for nearly ten minutes before hearing the explosion, muffled through the heavy canopy. He said a brief requiem for his little killer drone.

Running hard now, out of the jungle through a clear area of low shrubs near a gorge, the Assassin finally heard the dogs. No problem, he thought, I'll go downstream and drop the pack on the bank, with a contact detonator. The dogs will go for it and chew it to pieces and blow themselves up for their troubles. That should buy me plenty of time to reach the extraction zone. He put the pack down and loosened the Kevlar vest that also served as a weapons harness. An explosive charge taken from his harness went quickly into the pack, wired with a detonator to fire on a broken circuit. He looked at his watch as he straightened up. Thirty minutes to work westward to the EZ. Plenty of time.

The Assassin was about to turn on his transponder and call in the extraction team when the rifle fire stitched across his partially unprotected back, knocking him into the gorge. As he fell, in what seemed like micro-slow motion, the analytical part of his mind put the shooter at over a quarter-mile. Another random roving patrol, he thought. Ah, shit, with those you just have to take your chances. A lucky shot from a distance. And me with my vest off. Life is all probabilities, isn't it?

John Jacob Connard, former Special Forces soldier, US Army. In the context of this mission, the Assassin. Uncertain professions, both. He had been shot before, and knew the numbness of shock would yield to pain. This time, though, he would be dead before he felt it. A blessing.

He watched the pack fall ahead of him. He saw the sheer drop to the river below, and admired the rising sun sparkling the top of the waterfall as he fell past. Colombia is a beautiful place to die, he thought. Then, as he turned in the air and his view rolled down the gorge, he dropped face-first through foliage growing out the side of the cliff and collided with an explosion of white feathers, a beak digging sharply into his cheek.

A dove's nest. The Assassin silently apologized for the unintended harm as his mind slid into shock. His falling motion seemed to slow to nothing and the cliff wall ballooned out to embrace him. The pain hit, unexpectedly, too early, in a brilliant flash of deep blue light. His vision tunneled down onto his watch, then faded out entirely. It was 0549.

Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, MD | Sunday 0540 EDT

A bit over 2,500 miles north of the Columbian jungle and its jagged cliffs, the night crew for the SDI exercises at Goddard Space Flight Center was just wrapping up, unaware of the Assassin or his activities.

Edwin Edwards, night-shift controller for the exercises, smiled broadly at his crew as he rose from the control chair, congratulating them.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, that was a very good response, on a challenging exercise. This segment is hereby complete. Thank you so much for your hard work and focus. Shift change is coming up. So relax a moment, then get your notes together to brief your day-shift replacements, please.

"And speaking of the day shift... hey, good morning, Aaron. Can't sleep? Or are you just real anxious to get into it?"

Aaron O'Meara, a day-shift player for the exercises, rolled his wheelchair smoothly over the threshold into the big room as he spoke.

"Can I play with the system for a few minutes, sir? While there's a break? I'm wondering if it will still pick up those asteroids we were looking at yesterday afternoon."

"Sure, Aaron, why not? You're here early for your shift, and after all this *is* basic research." Edwards chuckled as he added "and maybe at some point we'll need to defend ourselves from space as well as from the surface. Disgruntled North Korean asteroid belt miners boosting a few into collision paths, that sort of thing...."

This pleasantly dissolved the remaining tension in the big room, the 'X-Room' at Goddard. The Center as well as each of the team members had a lot vested in the outcome. The two-week long, round-the-clock exercise had been designed to test the ability of satellite sensors to detect, and lasers to destroy, simulated ballistic missiles arcing up out of the atmosphere. The program was still called SDI, Strategic Defense Initiative, a throwback to the Reagan era. A game, here in this time and this place, but possible life and death in the future. Rogue governments. Terrorist groups. More of a concern every day. A brave new world.

The night crew smiled tired greetings at Aaron and stretched weary backs. The controller exited the X-Room and went to relieve the pressure of too much overnight coffee.

Aaron O'Meara, Ph.D, Goddard's most youthful astrophysicist, tapped the keyboard, and the gimbaled sensors on the satellite array swung spaceward. He admired the angled view of the earth's blue envelope on the big screen as the sensors traversed the southern horizon. But then, as the field of vision rotated away from the planet and outward into space, the impossibility appeared. Aaron's breath left his lungs in a whoosh of shock. His professional decorum deserted him.

"Holy shit!" he yelled, "Tracking on! Tracking on! Turn the fucking tracking on!"

But Jack Walton, the tactical tracking technician, had seen it too, and his hands already were flying over the control board. The sensor array on the satellite stopped its traverse.

“History! Plot it, for God’s sake, Jack, plot it! Gimme the history! Amy! No, I mean Bill, go find Ed. If he’s in the can, get him out of there quick!”

“History plotting, coming up, a few seconds,” Walton yelled, fingers flying. Then, anticipating the next commands, “Recording all. Tac computer and mainframe both. Full archival engaged.”

The big screen split into two displays. The top one showed double-stranded flaming interwoven spirals; erratic, disjointed motions flashing through space. They watched, fascinated. Jack Walton made the first coherent statement.

“I don’t think the digitizer can keep up with those motions.”

Aaron was thinking about that when the plot came up on the bottom display, the tactical computer displaying the object’s trajectory.

“Jesus, Jack, you may be right. What the hell is that thing? It just came out of nowhere, south of the ecliptic, must be half the distance to the moon. Incredible delta-V’s. And it’s headed in... Omigod!”

On the top screen, the object bifurcated, a small part dancing with a bigger part, all crazy erratics and transverses and reverses, spiraling explosions of light and motion.

“It’s a fucking dog-fight,” Walton muttered, fingers flying with the afterthought of instructing the mainframe to increase the scan capture rate.

“Jack, the thing’s gonna impact. Gimme a plot projection solved to the earth’s surface, can you?”

“Aye sir,” Walton said, his old Navy reflex kicking in even though now a civilian who outranked Aaron O’Meara by a huge margin in age and experience. “Coming up.”

The team watched in rapt horror as the berserk dance ended in a flash of light and two separate objects hurtled earthward at high velocity.

“Entry coming up,” Walton announced. “Larger object projected impact northwest South America, probably Columbia. Smaller object mid-Atlantic coast, US.” The plot followed the trajectories, still erratic and spiraling, but now clearly separate. The projected impact points flickered around on the screen as the computer tried to update solutions to motions outpacing its software. Then probability algorithms kicked in, painting somewhat steadier crimson oval impact zones.

“Delmarva looking likely,” Walton amended. “Jesus! Could be this area. At that speed if this thing’s got any size to it, we’re fucking toast! Brace yourselves!”

Aaron O’Meara slammed home the brake locks on his wheelchair and grabbed the edge of the control console. Tension streamed into the room. Adrenaline levels tracked the two plots on the bottom screen. The objects intersected the atmosphere. The top screen optical showed strangely distorted blue and green flaming patterns in the earth’s envelope.

Random thoughts of imminent death ran through ten minds. *My children; they have to live. I left dishes in the sink. I wish I had. I wish I hadn’t. Now I’ll never...*

Then, a few seconds later, the patterns abruptly snapped off just as abruptly as they had snapped into being. The crimson ovals of ground-zero impact zones flickered out. The real-time clock above the big screen showed 05:48:01 EDT.

Dead silence filled the X-Room, except for the exhalations of held breath. A few signs of the cross. Then Amy McLaughlin’s shaky voice: “Are we dead yet?”

A burst of nervous laughter erupted.

“Because if we’re not, I gotta pee.”

Edwin Edwards, exercise controller, ran back into the room into the midst of raucous hysteria.

“All right, what the hell is going on?”

Ten voices clamored as one. The controller calmed them.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it: incoming object, high speed, split in two, one of the projected impacts right here. But I didn’t hear a boom. Anybody hear a boom? Feel anything shake? No? So that’s good, right? We’re all still here, right? So let’s all calm down! Jack, can you show us a replay?”

They watched the replay, fascinated. The object just snapped into existence at 05:45:58 EDT, with no hint of any precursor motion. The ensuing division and crazy dance took two minutes and three seconds elapsed time to projected impact, then just as abruptly snapped out of existence. Chattering commentary from ten of the brightest minds in the business peppered the controller as they watched.

“Okay, I don’t know what happened here any better than you,” Edwards told them, “but we weren’t annihilated. I guess we gotta report it. Aaron, come with me, please. The rest of you, please just try to calm down. Reset the satellite to the exercise scenario, and get ready to brief your shift replacements. Jack, would you carve this event out of the data file and tag it as Non-Exercise Anomaly or something? That way anybody interested can fool with it on the backup system down the hall and not interfere with the exercise. We’ve got a mission here, and it’s costing the taxpayer big bucks, so we can’t let ourselves get blown off course by this. Although it sure as hell is fascinating. C’mon, Aaron.”

In his office, the controller took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

“Aaron, I’ve got to call this in. I don’t even know to whom. But it’s clearly something odd enough and seems real enough that I can’t just write it off. Now, here’s my problem,” he enumerated the points on his fingers.

“One. You have this wonderful wacky sense of humor.

“Two. You’re far too partial to practical jokes. And so’s your buddy Jack Walton.

“Three. You came on shift a half-hour early, wanting to peer into space.

“And four. The next thing you know we’ve got an invasion of freaking flaming vortices that scares the shit out of everybody.

“So, Aaron, before I go making a public fool out of myself, and possibly even hurting our program here, this would be a good time to tell me it’s one of your jokes. We’ll all have a real good laugh. Talk for weeks about how O’Meara suckered us. Again. But there won’t be any harm done. You understand?”

Amazement and consternation and hurt flashed in alternating patterns across Aaron’s open countenance. He stuttered to get the words out.

“Ed...” he began, but the insistent buzz of a high priority call interrupted. The controller held up his hand.

“Hold it; I gotta take this, Aaron. It’s the hot line.”

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” the Goddard duty officer said, “but we have a priority call from the Pentagon holding. A colonel in the Situation Room over there wants to know since we had the satellite active, did we track any atmospheric anomalies with our SDI arrays? They got a buncha ghosts on east coast radars and some visual sightings of strange stuff in the DC area. They’re scrambling some F16s out of Andrews and choppers out of Quantico and Pax River. No ground impacts reported, but Homeland Security is antsy. Helluva whoop-ti-doo, sir, they want to know can we shed any light on it?”

“Okay. Tell them we do have something. We’ll send it over the secure defense net. Couple of gigabytes, probably. Take us about five minutes to prep it, maybe five to download. Tell them it’s about two minutes of digital MPEG. That’s m-p-e-g. Give me two minutes to get to the backup X-Room, F117. Patch them in there.”

Then, hanging up, “Aaron, I’m sorry. It did seem like a logical question to ask, but unless you’re so good a hacker you can also create real effects in the atmosphere, I have to apologize.”

Aaron had already deduced the nature of the conversation.

“No impacts or explosions, I take it?”

“Apparently not.”

“Ed, no offense taken. Hey, I’m fantastically flattered that you think I could manage to pull off a stunt like this. Wow! What a compliment! Come on, I’ll help you set up the files for upload before I report for the exercise. Who wants them, anyway? Isn’t this something? I haven’t been this excited since I went too wide on the turn down the handicapped ramp in the parking garage...”

Aaron O'Meara's youthful exuberance played counterpoint to his precocious technological knowledge, and he chattered stream-of-consciousness ideas at the controller as he wheeled beside his boss down the hall to the backup X-Room.

C&O Canal Bike Trail, Washington, DC | Sunday 0547 EDT

Legs pumping, heart thumping, sweat rolling down her back, bike tires humming, Lara Picard was in a Zen-like state. Some distant part of her mind efficiently processed details: pace, gearing, braking, twists and turns and occasional discontinuities in the asphalt. The rest of her mind was totally immersed in the present moment: pulsing with the rhythm of her body, devoid of thinking, open to the universe. Fatigue was a distant thing, unimportant. She looked at her watch, realizing a personal best was imminent on this ride along her favorite bike training route. The time was 0548.

She encountered little traffic at this early hour, Washington DC sleeping off its Saturday night excesses on a Memorial Day weekend. A fat full moon illuminated the pre-dawn morning, giving plenty of light to see. The cool air bore a slight humidity. Wispy fog tendrils layered over the river, reminding her of her farm-girl roots. A young healthy organism riding flat out, her soul hummed in tune with the beauty of the river and the bike trail and the sun coming up over the horizon. She became one with the universe, a resonant frequency, on this fine early Sunday morning.

Head down, Lara barely sensed the eerie flashing ahead of her; the trees between the trail and the river mostly shielded it. She never saw the strange spiraling fire in the sky, nor the splash in the water. She only saw, speeding downhill a minute later, the bee's motion at the top of her peripheral vision. She had no time to react before it flew into her open mouth at full air intake. She tried to cough it out. In an instant of inattention, her front tire caught a rut off the asphalt, and she and the bike were airborne over an embankment. Her perceptions sped up and the world turned in slow motion, as if clicking through freeze-frame images. Impact with the ground came in a brilliant flash of green light as she blanked out.

Inert on a pebbled rocky shelf above a drainage swale, her breathing labored, her body broken and bleeding, Lara's mind sought another place....

God, he's a great lover, she thought, her body still sweating lightly from their exertions. She admired his body in the dim light, sinewy muscle over a bone structure that came as close as she'd ever seen to perfect aesthetic balance. Michelangelo's David, she mused. Or maybe more like those old movies of Bruce Lee when he's in motion. What a wonderful body.

Her lover slept on, a slight smile twitching the corner of his mouth as she knelt by the bed and ran her hand down from shoulder to hip. He gave a tiny moaned exhalation of contentment, but stayed sunk into post-coital relaxation, sound asleep. She nuzzled him gently in the small of the back, whispered how much she loved him, then pulled the sheet up and went to take her shower.

He woke and studied her as she came toweling herself out of the bathroom.

"You are looking exceptionally gorgeous this morning, my love."

"Now, I wonder why that is?" She laughed, toweling off unabashedly in front of him.

He patted the side of the bed.

"Sit down, I think I have an answer. It will make you even more gorgeous, if that's remotely possible...."

"Later, satyr." She laughed again. "I'm going for a bike ride."

"My God, woman, you should be way too tired for a bike ride! Am I not doing my job here? Please let me make amends. I'll really try to do better!"

His good intentions were punctuated by a rising under the sheet, which she studied interestedly.

"Nah, I'm not tired, I'm energized, and I'm going for a bike ride, before the traffic picks up. It's getting light enough outside. You put your head back down on your pillow and have a little

snooze, and then you can massage my sore legs and buns when I get back. You know how much we both like that.”

“Umm, that’s all well and good, but how about a quickie to energize you some more, speed you on your way, make you nice and limber, keep you from getting saddle-sores or something?” He threw off the sheet to more expressively salute the idea.

She felt herself moistening.

“You’ve already given me saddle-sores, buster. So I’m going to wriggle into my biking shorts... unless... something should just happen to wriggle in before that,” she said coyly. “So, hey, catch me if you can, big boy.”

She grinned, flipped the towel over his face, and fled to her dressing closet on the other side of the bedroom....

Lara Ellen Picard, lawyer and mother and triathlete and lover, lay inert and bleeding on a shelf of rock between the C&O Canal and the Potomac River. As the morning sun and its heat rose over the tree line, her mind spiraled around and around that erotic event, struggling to pull up more detail. Did it take place this morning, or last Sunday morning?

She couldn’t recall. Her mind seemed to have fuzzed into a state of hyperactive unspooling; remembrances and emotions flashed through it as if that most recent memory had been on the surface, and like the fastened end of a runaway ball of string it was now unwinding other memories. What a strange sensation, she thought. Almost like her consciousness was being unraveled from within her brain. Almost like it was being read into some kind of legal record. Ah, she recognized dimly, that must mean I’m dying.

But as if to counterpoint that thought and thus deny death, the unraveling suddenly reversed. The erotic memory flooded back. An overpowering sense of warmth and love ran alongside passion and spun into the forefront of her consciousness. She saw her lover in a vision so clear and acute it was almost painful.

Passion, she acknowledged fondly, oh yes; but love the far greater part of it. Even with a body in shock and pain, Lara moistened in reaction to her vision, validating once again those elemental forces that exist at the base of the brain and serve to drive life onward. Her mind, beckoned, fled toward those elemental forces. Toward survival.