

Excerpts from *GIANT KILLERS* by Mark Barkawitz  
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CHAPTER FIVE  
MINORS AND MAJORS

As graveyard ended and day shift began, cars and trucks drove in and out sporadically of the entrance to Parker Enterprises. Likewise, the old Suburban turned into the driveway and parked in the half-filled parking lot in front of the factory, where two-of-three stacks belched their usual gray smoke trails into an otherwise clear, blue, morning sky. Though their shifts were the same, Carol and Mary worked in different departments: one blue collar, one white collar. As they opened the front doors on opposite sides of the Suburban, out front on the sidewalk, the bearded runner ran past the entrance driveway, dressed as before with his backwards cap and wrap-around shades.

The temporary gate was already opened and the beat-up Ram pick-up was parked in the dirt in front of the partially-remodeled house. Walter Fritz, the burly contractor, stood on a six-foot step ladder and struggled to hold a new window casing with one hand—the middle finger of which was missing at the top knuckle from a table saw accident too many years ago to worry about—and a pneumatic nail-gun in the other. As he'd grown older—and girthier—Walter had also grown to dislike standing on ladders. But a man had to do what a man had to do to earn a buck.

For the same reason, the bearded runner ran onto the work area, slowed in the dirt, and approached Walter, who from his perch had seen him coming and had already stopped shooting nails. “Can I help you?”

“Looks like you could use another pair of hands.” He took a big breath to catch his wind. “I need a job.”

“Hmph.” Walter had had lots of helpers over the years but none before had interviewed in running shorts. Sure, this guy looked strong enough to be of some use.

But pretty muscles were one thing; hard work was another. He climbed down from the ladder. "Lotsa' people 'round here lookin' for work these days. You don't look familiar."

"Just got back in town. Been a while."

"Most folks movin' outta this town, not back in."

"So I've noticed."

Walter nodded. "That's how I got this place on the cheap. Not that I cheated anyone," he was quick to add. That kind of thing went against his constitution. "Lord knows if there'll be any buyers left 'round here once she's spruced up. You ever work construction?"

"Yep."

"Can I depend on you?" His last helper had been a flake.

"Yep."

"You ever been arrested?"

The runner paused, removed his shades, and looked Walter in the eyes before answering: "Yep."

Walter stared back at him. "You coulda' lied. I wouldn'ta' known."

"Yep."

"Didn't murder anyone, did ya'?"

"Nope."

Walter nodded, rubbed his stubbled chin with his left hand and its stubbed digit, before deciding. "Seven o'clock Monday morning. Bring your tool belt and framiny hammer. You're late, you're gone." He climbed back up the ladder and shot another nail into the window casing.

The runner smiled, put his shades back on, turned and ran away from the jobsite.

On the ladder, Walter stopped suddenly and called after him: "Hey, wait a minute. What's your name?"

But the runner was already too far away on the street to hear him.

Walter shrugged. Oh, well. The morning was burnin' and he had a lot of work to do before lunch.

Twenty minutes later, in an alley on the other side of town, behind an old, two-story garage with peeling paint and a wooden stairway that led up to a door on a landing, a scruffy little dog without a collar over-turned a trash can and went through the garbage. The man who fed him had dropped him off there a week earlier and then drove away. Another casualty of a moribund economy. The little dog was still waiting for him to return. In the interim, he had lost a few pounds and learned to fend for himself. He'd grown cautious of the cars and humans that appeared at times in the alley. The back sides of the properties that abutted the cracked, pot-holed asphalt offered a plethora of hide-outs for the diminutive pooch, who rooted up an empty beef stew can from the recycling bin under the stairway, stuck his nose inside, and licked the tasty remains. At the corner, he heard a noise, lifted his head quickly with the can still stuck around his snout, and spotted the runner approaching at the end of the alley. The little dog shook the can off his nose and ran for cover under a nearby bush.

The runner slowed, stopped near the stairway, breathed deeply to regain his breath. Spotting the over-turned trash can—*not again*—he shook his head, righted the can, and threw the trash back into it. He looked around for the culprit, as he put the top back on the can. He removed mail from a mailbox nailed to the garage wall, then shuffled through it: "Occupant . . . Occupant . . . Occupant." He tossed the fliers and junk mail in the blue recycling bin, then stepped his foot up on the second step and untied a key from his shoe lace. He climbed the stairs, put the key in the door lock, and disappeared inside.

From the bushes, the scruffy little dog poked his head out, surveyed the area, and sniffed the air. A truck turned into the alley. The little dog pulled his head back into the bushes like a scared turtle into its shell. A roundly-shaped man in a uniform sat behind the steering wheel, eyeing the surroundings carefully. Blake Forrister worked for the county. And he didn't care for the term, *dog catcher*, even if that was his job. As the truck cruised slowly down the alley, the little dog couldn't read the words painted on the sides of its cargo box like a warning: "ANIMAL CONTROL."

In the small bathroom upstairs over the old garage, the linoleum floor felt cool under his bare feet. He turned on the faucet of the claw-footed tub and placed a rubber plug

in its drain. He tested and adjusted the warmth of the water, then pulled the sweaty T-shirt over his head, exposing in the mirror over the sink the diagonal scar on his chest near his heart.

At her desk in her cubicle, Mary used the blade of a letter opener to slice through the top of another envelope. As low-woman on the totem pole of the Public Relations Department—to where she had transferred last year from Shipping & Receiving—her duties included opening, deciphering, and logging in-coming mail to the company in general. Of which there was a constantly large influx, as the pile of unopened correspondence on her desk—near a framed, school picture of Willy—attested.

In the Reception Room outside of the CEO's office, Connie Walls sat behind the large desk, with the phone to her ear, pencil in hand. She was blonde, built, and beautiful. But she was more than just window dressing.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Parker is in a meeting." It was her standard answer, whether true or not. Mr. Parker didn't have time for everyone who called. She was his buffer. "May I ask what this is concerning? Um hm. Um hm." She took good notes. Had aspirations. Had already submitted her application to be Donald Trump's next "Apprentice" on TV.

Suddenly, the large mahogany doors marked "Paige Parker Jr. – CEO" swung open from inside and Paige Parker Jr.—tall, forty, confident in his pin-striped Armani suit—walked out. He had been groomed since prep school through Harvard Business School to take over the factory he'd inherited from his father—Paige Parker Sr.—a businessman of near-legendary standing in the community, who had opened the factory around which their town had grown and prospered. But these were different times. Their competition had opened factories in foreign countries and were out-sourcing their work force with cheap, foreign labor and in the process, eliminating costly EPA regulations, which had no jurisdiction outside the United States. Parker Enterprises was being under-bid on contracts. Orders were down. Lay-offs had resulted. He'd negotiated a wage roll-back with the union last year—averting what surely would have been a fatal strike—and was still fighting them over escalating health care benefits, the costs of which didn't figure into foreign labor either. But he'd be damned if he'd move

his father's factory out of the country. This was an American company and he was a good American—a republican, card-carrying member of the NRA. So one way or another, Paige Parker Jr. had to manufacture other ways to cut costs. Three lawyers from the firm of Howard, Fine, & Howard followed in tow with their briefcases, as he continued their on-going discussion:

“I don't give a damn about *environmental impact*.” He turned to Miss Walls at her desk. “Get the Mayor on the phone. See if he's free for lunch Monday.” Without waiting for her to answer, he again turned to the lawyers. “For God's sake, it's an empty lot. We have to dump—” He stopped, corrected himself: “Store our waste products somewhere. We can't keep spending millions annually sending our chemical waste to out-of-state sites. It's just not fiscally practical. And if this plant closes, so does this town. Now earn your retainer and make it happen.” He raised his hand to stop them from replying and showed them the doorway out.

The three lawyers exited. Parker turned back to Connie, who already had the Mayor's office on the line. She covered the mouthpiece and listened to her boss.

“Oh, and while you have the city on the line, reserve the baseball field for tomorrow.” He gave his secretary a courtesy smile and turned to leave.

“Yes, Sir, Mr. Parker.” She'd take care of it. Just like always. And some day, those lawyers would be taking orders from her.

from CHAPTER SEVEN

PRACTICE

. . . and drove off, raising a cloud of dust in the dirt lot, causing Willy, Max, Sam, and Larry to cough, fan the dust away from their faces, and move back over behind the backstop. Glumly, they continued to stare at their superiors on the other side of the chain-link.

Sam repeated his earlier mantra: “We'll never beat those guys.”

Larry pretended to laugh. “*Beat ‘em?* Are you kiddin’ me? They’ll massacre us. It’ll be Custard’s Last Stand all over again.”

“That’s *Custer*, Brain Boy,” Max corrected. American History was one of her favorite subjects in school. “He was a general, not a dessert.”

“Yeah?” Larry answered. “Well, we’re gonna be the Giants’ main course: Dead. Meat.” His summation completed, Larry leaned back, slid down the chain-link, and sat with his back against the backstop. “I hate baseball. I’m always on the worstest team. We *always* lose.”

“Dr. Phil says that could give you an inferiority complex.” Sam often watched the TV psychologist with his mom when he got home from school in the afternoons. She didn’t have a job anymore. That was okay with Sam. He liked her home when he got there. And Daddy still had his job. “I don’t know what that means, but it sounds pretty bad.” He sat cross-legged next to his large friend.

Larry glared over at his little buddy. “Shut up, Sam.”

Sam shut up.

Max continued to stand and stare through the chain-link. As Paige Parker III finished throwing and walked off the practice mound, he caught her staring. He smiled back, which took her by surprise. She looked away quickly. “The other teams probably won’t be as good as the Giants either,” she rationalized.

Sam nodded in agreement. Larry shook his head. Who was she kiddin’? They were headed for a long, losing season. *Girls*—they thought they knew everything. But as he looked away, he spotted Willy over by the bushes that enclosed the boundaries of the park, staring off into space. Larry pointed.

“Hey, what’s Spaz doin’ over there?”

Max shrugged and went over to investigate.

Sam and Larry got up and followed. They joined Willy, who continued to stare over the bushes and down the hill at the vacant lot below, where a bearded man in a backwards cap, T-shirt, and Levis tossed rocks and sticks and trash into a pile, clearing a large, flat section of the dirt below.

“Hey,” Larry pointed out what the others already knew. “Ain’t that the same guy Spaz was talkin’ to at practice the other day?”

Willy nodded.

“What’s he doin’ down there?” Sam asked.

Willy shrugged. He’d been wondering the same thing.

In the dirt lot below, the runner continued to police an ever-wider area, tossing the debris on a single pile. He was already sweating and had rolled up the sleeves of his T-shirt. The bill of his cap covered his neck from the sun. He grabbed the end of a large, dead tree branch and dragged it towards the pile.

In the bushes that led to the lot below, Larry, Max, Sam, and Willy kept their heads low and crept surreptitiously down the hillside, each with their baseball gloves and Sam with his bat. With Larry at the point like a scout in a cavalry movie, he led them to the bottom of the hill, where he raised his hand to stop them. He knelt on one knee and peeked out through the bushes. The others did likewise, spying at the bearded man in cap and dark shades, who continued his chores in the open field. Larry turned back, waved his cohorts closer, and explained his plan quietly:

“Spaz, go find out what he’s doin’.”

Willy shook his head—no. “Why me?”

“Cause you already talked to him once,” Larry whispered.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “He already knows you.”

“Just don’t get too close,” Max advised. “We’ll watch you from the bushes. Run if you have to.”

*Run?* Willy shook his head again. He wasn’t going out there. Alone. No way.

As the runner continued to clean up debris, the bushes rustled, and Willy was pushed from behind by a pair of meaty hands out into the open. Behind his sunglasses, the runner pretended not to notice, instead tossing some broken bricks onto the pile. He overheard the whispers behind Willy urging him to: “Ask him.” “Ask him, Spaz.”

Willy gulped. “Whatcha’ doin’, Mister?”

“Cleaning up.”

“What for?”

Without answering, he picked up a roundish rock, gripped it as if it were a baseball. “No practice today?”

“The Giants have the field reserved,” Willy answered glumly.

He nodded. “I was scouting them earlier. Pretty good team.”

Willy agreed. “They’re the offending champions.”

He smiled. Kids were funny. “You probably mean *defending*. Pretty good arm on that tall kid.”

“Yeah. That’s Paige Parker the third. He’s the manager’s son. His father owns the factory where my mom works. He doesn’t go to our school.”

He nodded back, tossed the rock up in the air, caught it, and gripped it again like a baseball. “You think I can hit that tree trunk over there?”

Willy looked over at the stump of what had once been a large tree. He shrugged. How should he know?

The runner turned his cap forward, went into a stretch position—as if standing on a mound with runners on base—and glared at the stump about sixty feet away. He lifted his left leg, reached his right arm back, then stepped forward and his arm followed through, releasing the rock from his grip like a pitch. It smacked dead bark off the stump across the lot.

Willy was impressed. “You were the pitcher, huh?”

Still bent forward from his follow through, he admitted: “Yep. I was the pitcher.” He straightened himself. Tried not to think about it. There’d been more than enough wasted time for that already. He turned to the boy. “What about you?”

“Me?” Willy asked. “I don’t have a position. Not yet anyway.”

“So what *do* you have?”

Willy was confused by the question, but offered up, “Just my mitt and a ball,” which was still on his left hand with the ball inside.

“It’s a fielder’s glove.” He picked up another stray two-by-four and tossed it on the pile, careful not to get a splinter. “Only the catcher uses a mitt. First baseman, too.”

Willy nodded back.

“Too bad we don’t have a bat.” He waved his hand like a game show host at the cleared area of the lot. “Play a little pepper.”



*“Pepper?”*

“It’s a fielding drill,” he explained.

Willy wasn’t sure if he should, but he offered hesitantly: “S-Sam’s got a bat.”

“Sam?” he asked.

The bushes behind Willy rustled again and the barrel of an aluminum bat appeared suddenly through the branches, held by another boy’s hand. The runner smiled again. Yep, kids were funny, all right. . .