

Slay the Dragon: An Adam Weldon Thriller

by William McGinnis

CHAPTER 1

DAVE DORMAN

Dave Dorman wasn't thinking about the throbbing pain in

his legs from two gunshots received during a drug bust gone bad the year before. Nor did he dwell on the lingering soreness from multiple deep lacerations to his hands and forearms incurred six months earlier while breaking up a knife fight between two homeless men on fentanyl. Also, at least for the moment, he stopped worrying about the reprimand from his superiors admonishing him for even getting involved in that knife fight—their implicit message being: turn around, walk the other way.

Dave stood on his front porch in the East Bay hills breathing in the crisp morning air, looking out over Oakland and the shimmering waters of San Francisco Bay. He smiled and laughed, realizing for the millionth time that despite its challenges, life was good.

His two darling little girls, Debbie age three and Darla six, were getting along for a change and were looking forward to being with their grandma for the day. Due to the pandemic, schools and daycares were closed, but his mom, oddly laid off from her Kaiser nurse's job, leapt at the chance to spend time with her beloved grandchildren.

If you were going to be a single parent of two little girls, it was a blessing to have a mom like his. And if you're going to be an Oakland cop, it was good to be a big strong—even if wounded and cut up—African-American man.

As he dropped off his girls, his mom said, “You be careful Davy. You know what's been happening at these marches. They're turning violent and police are getting attacked.”

“Don't worry mom. I'll be fine.”

“Don't give me that 'I'll be fine' talk. You're too much of a risk taker. You gotta remember: You're everything— EVERYTHING—to your girls and me. You hear me now? You gotta be careful!”

Picking up on their grandmother's concern, his bright, cute- as-a-button girls chimed in. “Daddy, daddy, please please be careful today!”

As Dave drove into the center of the city, the homeless encampments seemed quiet and hunkered down. The few joggers and bikers around Lake Merritt seemed bent on finishing early and heading for cover. Even the vibrant multistory murals along Webster Street—which normally seemed to dance and shimmy—appeared muted, subdued. Something felt off. Was it him? Or was this the lull before the battle?

In the squad room at police headquarters, the morning briefing made no mention of protecting lives and property, but instead emphasized keeping one's head down. This had been the message for a while now. Not good.

His assignment for the day, as he knew it would be, was to cover the latest in a long string of protest marches through downtown Oakland. He and Payton, his partner for the day, drove along

Broadway toward their assigned location, the federal building at Huey Newton Plaza.

Many of the storefronts lining the boulevard were shuttered in plywood, others were empty, charred, burned-out caverns— former Footlocker, Target, and Walgreens storefronts. Mute testimony that this was indeed a favorite protest route.

Dave and Payton parked their squad car, and got out to survey the intersection in front of the federal building they were to protect. Sitting on the curb thirty yards away was a three-foot-wide by three-foot-deep by three-foot-high pallet of bricks. Where did it come from? Looking around, here and there along the street, he counted not just the one—but four full pallets of bricks. Hundreds, maybe thousands of bricks. There were no construction sites in the area. Whoever put them here did so to incite violence, to turn a peaceful protest into a full on mob riot. Once windows got smashed, Dave knew, inevitably, inexorably, protestors transform into rioters hell bent on looting, burning, and fighting—especially attacking police. The bricks guaranteed trouble. But there were too many for the two of them to move or hide.

Vehicle traffic was light, and then gradually vanished altogether. Foot traffic also died out. Leaving the boarded-up, burned-out, warzone of a downtown eerily quiet—except for a slowly increasing hubbub emanating from the distance: the sound of approaching marchers.

Then they arrived. At first it was just a few people hurrying to stay in front of the crowd, people with cameras stopping to film and then scurrying ahead again.

Then came the surprisingly scraggly main column. Except for an occasional denser mass of people here and there, the crowd was sparse and spread out. Not really that many people if you counted heads. Maybe three or four hundred.

People of all races, sizes, and shapes. Very few masks.

Many—maybe a majority—of the banners and signs proclaimed “All Cops Are Bastards” or the shorter acronym “ACAB.” Some placards read “Defund the Police” and “Freedom Highway,” while others touted a wide range of causes.

Some marchers seemed innocent enough. Citizens simply out to exercise their right to peacefully protest. But Dave saw that a sizable percentage were looking for trouble. These picked up bricks as they passed the pallets.

Several solid ‘black blocks’ of marchers—each twenty or so strong—were dressed head-to-toe in black and marched in tight formation shoulder-to-shoulder, belly-button-to-back-bone. Black helmets and extra large black face masks left only narrow slits for the eyes. These ‘black blocks’ endlessly chanted “All cops are bastards,” and carried black shields, black batons, hammers, paint spray cans, and what Dave identified as bottles of fire accelerant.

Payton, standing beside him, yelled over the din, “Come on, Dave. It's getting dangerous out here. We better go inside.”

Dave said, “What's the point of us being here if we're just going to hide?”

“I hear you. But doggone it, look at those bricks. Look at this crowd.”

“Let them see the uniforms. See the blue.”

“They’re not paying us enough to get ourselves hurt. Besides, they specifically told us to play it safe.”

“Us being here, being visible, makes a difference. Reminds them to be civilized. Reminds them of what Abe Lincoln called the better angels of their nature.”

A brick sailed through the air and bounced across the sidewalk, missing them by only a few feet.

Payton said, “I’m going in,” then turned, unlocked a steel service door behind them, and disappeared inside.

Dave stayed outside. But he was no fool, so he called for back up. He reported to his sergeant that bricks were flying up and down the street, the situation was about to explode, and he urgently needed back up.

“No can do,” was the response. “A bunch of shop owners—the ones whose stores are still open—have already called pleading for help. But the mayor’s orders are to stay clear. It’s too dangerous. Besides, going in could escalate the situation.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding. We have to do something. We’re the thin blue line. Doing nothing is exactly what will escalate the situation. We have a responsibility—”

“Nope. From the mayor on down, our orders are to de-escalate, stay away.” Click.

Directly across the street, a guy moved differently, more independently, with a greater sense of purpose than those around him. Wearing a huge black face mask and all-black but tailored, well-fitting clothes, he ran up to one of the few remaining intact

windows—of a small, single-proprietor clothing store. Pulling a hammer from his backpack, he smashed the glass, sending shards flying. Then the nifty dresser stepped aside to let the rabble pour into the store through the shattered window.

Dave started across the four lane toward the store, but several bricks suddenly sailed out of nowhere. Most missed, but one caught him square on the left side of his head. Thank God for his helmet, but still the heavy brick stunned him, knocking him down.

As he struggled to get up, more bricks came at him, too many to dodge. Again most missed, but one clobbered his shoulder and another knocked his left leg out from under him, toppling him again to the pavement.

The situation, predictably, continued to escalate. More and more bricks flew. More of the few remaining windows up and down the street were getting smashed.

Half a block away, the guy in the nifty, tailored, all-black outfit threw a burning Molotov cocktail into a building. Then he did the same thing twice more, to two other buildings. The guy was systematically setting fire to Oakland's entire downtown. As Dave watched, lasers directed by malicious rioters played across his face, searching for his eyes.

Vehicle traffic was near zero. What few vehicles there were had blundered by pure accident into the melee, their oblivious drivers suddenly surrounded, mobbed, terrified. Rioters jumped up and down on their hoods, their roofs. The mob rocked the unfortunate vehicles back and forth, rolling some over. One driver got pulled out and beaten.

Dave called the station again and again to report the worsening situation, begging for back up. But each time the response was the same.

The total abdication of responsibility by the mayor and the police chief simply could not stand. After four calls to his sergeant—all with the same result—he had no choice but to call the mayor directly. After all, he knew the woman, and she knew him. One month earlier, on stage in the Prophecy Arena, in front of a crowd of thousands, she had praised him to the heavens and presented him with an award for his work with the Oakland Youth Non-Violence Program.

He was going outside the chain of command and there would be hell to pay, but he was at his wit's end. If law and order, if Oakland, if civilization was to have any chance, people with the responsibility and the power had to act, had to fight chaos. Someone around here had to act like a fucking adult.

The phone rang and rang, finally, someone said, "Yeah?" "It's an emergency! I have to talk with the mayor!"

"Not possible, the mayor's busy. This is Conrad, her assistant. Who's this?"

"I'm officer Dave Dorman, Oakland Police. The Mayor knows me. I absolutely have to talk with her. It's an emergency. I've got fires and a full-on riot here on Broadway. It's out of control. I need back up—"

"That won't be possible. You need to stand down. Get out of there."

"We can't stand down. Oakland is burning—"

“Officer, you've got a lot of nerve calling this number. We can't risk escalating the situation. Get out of there. Don't call this number again.” Click.

The steel service door of the federal building opened and Payton's blond head popped out. His eyes went wide as he took in the pandemonium up and down the street. He yelled, “Dave, get in here!” Then he pulled his head back in, slamming the door.

The guy had a point. It was time to go in, to live to fight the tide another day.

Dave, limping, backed away from the street, moving toward the steel door.

A white van approached. Unlike other vehicles, which instantly got stopped, surrounded and mobbed, this one rolled easily through the crowd, which parted like the Red Sea. It was as though the vehicle was known and had some special permission.

The van pulled up to the curb thirty feet from Dave, who had now backed up to the steel door, his hand reaching behind him for the doorknob. The van's sliding side door opened a crack. A gun barrel appeared. Shots rang out. Dave's body armor stopped the first seven bullets, but the eighth tore away half his throat, and the ninth caught him in the forehead right between the eyes.

As the shooting stopped and the van moved away, there was stunned silence. Then a woman with a bullhorn whooped, “A cop is down! Hurray!” At first only a small coterie cheered. Then more joined in, and soon the crowd took up the chant, “A cop is down! Hurray! A cop is down! Hurray!”

CHAPTER 2

JACK LONDON SQUARE MARINA

“It’s bad?” asked Adam Weldon. “Real bad,” said BC Davis.

“An Oakland cop, a black cop, shot down in broad daylight. You’d think the department would be all over it.”

“Damn straight,” said BC, his big black hands clenched into fists. “We’re on it, but we’re getting blocked, shut down.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Nope. We’re being defunded, decimated. We’re getting zero support from the mayor and city council. We’re getting crucified in the media. Even the FBI, at least the local office, is against us.”

Adam shook his head. “I just don’t get it.”

“While you’ve been out sailing the world, things here, frankly, have gone insane.”

“Yeah?”

“Just one example,” said BC. “I myself was suspended for stopping a mob from tearing down a statue of Jack London just a hundred yards from here.”

Sitting on the high quarter deck of BC's Chinese junk Big Zen, the two men turned to look at London's still-standing statue in the middle of Oakland's Jack London Square.

"Didn't you and Dave Dorman go through the academy together?"

"Sixteen years ago. Me and Dave. We were rookies together, and later, partners for ten years," said BC, his eyes wet. "I can't believe he's gone."

To give his old friend a private moment, Adam, forehead furrowed and jaw clenched, watched a weathered sloop motor upwind against the tide along the Oakland estuary, creeping toward open water on San Francisco Bay—and maybe far beyond.

"It's fucked up crazy town," resumed BC. "But I owe it to Dave and to whatever vestige remains of law and order, to bring his killers to justice. And I need your help."

"You got it," said Adam. "How did Dave die?"

BC, his face a portrait of agony, summarized what he knew of Dave Dorman's death. "Dave was guarding the federal building—a mile from here—standing out front. About 400 people were moving along the street. Started out peaceful. But people started throwing bricks, smashing windows, looting, lighting fires.

"Dave's phone shows four calls to his sergeant and one to the mayor's office requesting urgent back up. But none came. Then a van pulled up. Automatic fire from inside the van tore into Dave. His body armor stopped most of the bullets, but one tore open his throat and one hit him between the eyes."

Both men hung their heads, eyes welling, fists clenched. "Five calls for back up?"

“All refused by order of the mayor.” Eyes now shut, nostrils flared, BC’s whole body shook. “She didn’t want to fucking escalate the situation.”

They went below into the belly of Big Zen to BC’s electronics/video/drone lab to study Dave’s body camera and nearby surveillance camera footage. In one video, a white, new-looking Ford van pulled up in front of the federal building. The van’s side door opened for a moment, then the vehicle raced away. No license plates. And a balaclava covered the driver’s face, leaving only a narrow opening for the eyes.

BC ground his teeth. “Not very useful. Can’t see the shooter at all. No way to ID the driver or the van.”

“You’ve exhausted every avenue to track down the van?”

“Yeah,” said BC. “There’re tens of thousands of vans like it in Northern California. It’d be easier to find a needle in a haystack.”

They looked for news articles, social media commentary and YouTube footage covering events surrounding the murder.

“Amazing. So little coverage,” said Adam.

“Not so amazing. A cop’s death doesn’t fit the narrative,” observed BC. “Don’t you know cops are bad?”

One of the few newspapers to report the murder was a San Francisco publication nicknamed the ‘Comical.’ A stripped-down parody of its former, historic self, the ‘Comical,’ it seemed, no longer had the staff nor the inclination to even attempt objective reporting.

Going through a stack of newsprint copies—and also checking online—Adam found that Dave’s death garnered only a single brief

mention: a two-paragraph article buried deep on an interior page of the print edition and virtually hidden on its website.

However, because the 'Comical' allowed readers to post comments online, Adam found it valuable reading. The commenters spanned the full political and sanity spectrums, but a salient few provided telling perspective and details. Several described how pallets of bricks had been pre-positioned beforehand along the demonstration route—in places with no construction sites nearby.

When the demonstrators came upon the stacks of bricks, first one person, then a few more hurled them through windows, threw them at cars and at anything that would break.

Soon, a herd mentality took over, the allure of brick throwing became irresistible, others joined in, order disappeared, and chaos and looting erupted. Before long, Molotov cocktails flew right and left, igniting stores, cars, anything that would burn.

Other posters described how they'd been swept into vehicle caravans that descended on suburban downtowns such as that of Walnut Creek, sixteen miles inland from Oakland. There also, pallets of bricks had been pre-positioned. Egged on by the actions of a few, soon there too all hell broke loose.

"Coordination behind the scenes," said Adam. "Somebody's deliberately creating chaos."

"I see what you mean. Those bricks put right where they'd create mayhem," said BC.

CHAPTER 3

BRICKS

“**D**ave s murder and those bricks,” said Adam. “Gotta be connected.”

Adam surveyed BC’s thirty-by-fifteen-foot tech lab. The low-ceilinged space down in the belly of Big Zen was crammed with computers, flat screens, drone paraphernalia and piles of electronic gear. “You still a state-of-the-art white-hat hacker?”

BC grinned.

“Can you tap into video cameras in the riot areas? Maybe we can get images of whoever dropped off those bricks?”

“Gotta crack some passwords.” BC winked. “Just so happens, I’ve got something perfect for the job. NSA stuff released by Ed Snowden. Also, I’ll use AI recognition software to scan the videos for pallets of bricks.”

“Sounds good. In fact, amazing.”

“Oh yeah, AI’s advancing by leaps and bounds.”

BC set to work. Soon video of downtown Oakland and Walnut Creek moved across a half dozen flatscreens. Most of it flashed by, but every now and then a screen would pause to zero in on an object.

“When the AI finds bricks—or what it thinks might be bricks—it shows us the image. If it’s what we’re looking for, we’ll save and study it. If not, we click continue. Very rapidly, it’ll get better and better at identifying pallets of bricks.”

The two men settled in, scanning images of bricks and brick-like objects. Sure enough, the AI learned fast, and soon found images of bricks—mostly of people carrying and throwing them. But it found no brick stacks, on or off pallets.

“Well, the bricks were there alright,” said BC. “But whoever supplied them somehow avoided the cameras. Careful, clever devils.”

Scratching his head, Adam asked, “Let’s go at it from the other direction. Can you tap into the records of building supply and truck and forklift rental companies?”

Soon, computer and video surveillance data from building materials suppliers and truck and forklift rental companies scrolled across the screens.

“Look for anyone who bought multiple pallets of bricks and rented brick-hauling equipment in the days and weeks before the riots,” said Adam. “Ignore contractors and people who pulled building permits.”

“Also,” said BC, “When people use cash, I’ll run the store video footage through facial recognition software to see if anyone went around making multiple purchases.”

The computers churned data and the screens scrolled. Time dragged. The low-ceilinged space below the water line felt stuffy, oppressive and reeked with the pungent odor of sea water. Again the search came up empty.

“Okay, okay.” Adam let out a long sigh. “Let’s cast a wider net. Instead of just six Bay Area counties, let’s search all of Northern and Central California.”

Two hours later, still nothing. As the wakes of passing ships occasionally rocked Big Zen, the air closed in, offering no oxygen. The two big men slumped, immobile.

Adam looked up and pumped a fist in the air. “I’ve got an idea. What if these guys have deep pockets?”

“So?” asked BC.

“Maybe they’d buy an entire company. Let’s search for building supply companies that changed hands since the rioting began.”

“Makes sense,” said BC. “With a single purchase they’d get bricks, trucks and forklifts. Everything they’d need to drop off pallets of bricks.”

“All without having to rent anything or go around making a bunch of separate brick purchases.”

BC returned to his computers, and after a while said, “Interesting, I found six such outfits.”

“Which ones carried a big inventory of bricks?”

After consulting his computers for several minutes, BC said, “All six. That’s doable. But it’d be nice to narrow it down.”

Adam sat, staring into space, rubbing his chin. “Let’s take another look at the killer’s van.”

“Sure,” said BC. “But I’ve gone over it a hundred times. There’s not a distinguishing mark on it.”

The familiar, horror-filled footage, shot by multiple cameras, appeared on BC's big screen. There was the white van, the side door opening and closing, the balaclava covering the driver's face, leaving only a narrow opening for the eyes.

"Can you magnify and enhance the driver's eyes?" Adam asked.

A few moments later, filling the high-definition screen, loomed a pair of distinctly Asian eyes.

BC's jawed dropped. "Son of a gun."

"Interesting. Not what you'd expect," said Adam.

"Our stats show there aren't many Asian rioters," said BC.

"And darned few Asian members of ACAB."

The black Oakland cop consulted his computer for a few minutes, then turned again to Adam. "One of the six companies was purchased by someone with an Asian-sounding name.

Diablo Building Supply in Concord. The buyer was Gong Dongfeng."

"Of course," reflected Adam, "it might be just a coincidence—"

"But something tells me otherwise," said BC.