

## THE STORY BEHIND KILLER INSTINCT

By Joseph Finder

It was basically an accident that I started writing suspense thrillers set in the world of the corporation. I'd been writing spy novels of one sort or another since my first novel, *The Moscow Club* (1991). Then, a few years ago, a friend of mine in the CIA told me about their interest in the recent explosion in corporate espionage. He told me about how some companies around the world were borrowing techniques from the CIA and the KGB and Israel's Mossad in order to spy on each other (or defend themselves against penetration attempts and the like).

I thought: cool idea.

But when I started doing research for the novel that would become *Paranoia*, at companies like Apple Computer and Hewlett-Packard and Cisco Systems and Nabisco, I quickly realized I'd stumbled onto a much bigger story. Here was a world just as fraught with intrigue, betrayal, and paranoia as the CIA in the darkest days of the Cold War — but far richer in dramatic possibilities. There was money, power, and ambition. It was filled with human stories, the real stuff of drama. And it was a geysers of plot ideas.

I've never worked in a corporation, of course, which allowed me to do my research as a complete outsider. Observing the strange rituals of the corporate world, I often feel like an anthropologist studying the tribes of Fiji, albeit tribes whose chiefs and witchdoctors are all obsessed with fourth-quarter performance projections.

One of the aspects of the business world that's always amused — and fascinated — me is the dog-eat-dog, kill-or-be-killed ethos that some companies promote. Check out the titles of just a few recent business self-help books: *Business As War*; *Workplace Warrior*; *Eat or be Eaten*; *West Point Leadership Lessons*; *From Battlefield to Boardroom*; *Team Secrets of the Navy SEALs*; *The Art of War For Executives*; *Winning Under Fire*; and *Unleashing the Warrior Within*. The list goes on and on. The self-help sections in bookstores are filled with them. One day, while interviewing a senior vice president at a major high-tech company, I noticed, in his office, a shelf lined with these books. I thought: What if a *real-life* warrior — a Navy SEAL or a Special Forces officer, say — put his battlefield skills to work to get ahead in a company? What if he took this stuff literally?

As I thought this premise through and refined it, I evolved a tale of ambition, corporate macho, and the meaning of success, which became **KILLER INSTINCT**. I made my hero, Jason Steadman, a sales executive, because salesmen (and yes, most of the salespeople in the companies I visited were men) tend to be super-competitive. They're all about winning. There's a premium placed on "animal aggressiveness." Very often, if they're not cut out for it, they hit the wall, flame out around thirty or so. (There's a good reason why so much great drama, from Arthur Miller to David Mamet, involves salesmen.)

Jason, then, was a guy of around thirty who's starting to burn out. He's married to a lovely woman who happens to be more ambitious than he is. She's a Boston Brahmin whose family was once rich but lost its fortune. Her sister is married to a rich Hollywood TV producer. (I thought of that great H. L. Mencken definition of wealth as "any income that is at least \$100 more a year than the income of one's wife's sister's husband.")

And then one day Jason meets a guy who served in the Special Forces in Iraq, who has contempt for the Aeron-chair warriors in the corporation. As Jason and Kurt Semko become fast friends, Kurt is determined to use everything he learned in war to help boost Jason up the corporate ladder. For Jason, it's like knowing the biggest, baddest kid in the playground has got his back. The ruthless buddy, the ally who'll go much further than you ever would. Jason has

made the proverbial deal with the devil. It's part fantasy, part nightmare — pretty much the ingredients of the kind of suspense fiction I enjoy.

And not only suspense fiction. Think of Balzac's great criminal Vautrin, who's ruthless and amoral but totally loyal; he'll do anything for the young men he befriends. Or the countless folktales with a similar moral: be careful what you wish for — or who's granting your wishes.

The funny thing is, when I spent time with actual Special Forces guys to research my Kurt Semko character, I found that they all seemed much lower-key, much less aggressive than their corporate counterparts. Then again, no one makes *them* do fourth-quarter performance projections.

### **About the Research I did for Killer Instinct**

One of the first things I had to decide was what kind of company Jason should work in. I'd done consumer electronics in *Paranoia* — cell phones and BlackBerries and such — and I'd set *Company Man* in a old-line Midwestern industrial company that's trying to transform itself into the high-tech purveyor of the "Office of the Future" — sort of like Steelcase or Herman Miller.

As it turned out, I'd just bought a flat-panel TV and, like a lot of other people, I became obsessed with this newfangled technology. So I decided that Jason should work for a company like Sony or Panasonic or NEC — a mammoth Japanese electronics corporation, in the flat-panel-display division. This is a 37-billion-dollar-a-year industry. Plasmas and LCDs aren't just TVs and computer monitors; they're now in cell phones and car dashboards and digital cameras, even billboards. And they're all made in Asia — mostly Japan and Korea.

(The flexible "PictureScreen" in **KILLER INSTINCT**, by the way, is actually based on an invention by an MIT professor named Vladimir Bulovic, whom I interviewed. He's devised a remarkable, next-generation flat-panel display based on quantum-dot LED technology — a so-called "organic" LED display. You can't yet roll it up into a tube, but he's working on it.)

As I began researching, I became intrigued by what it must be like to be an American executive working for a Japanese-owned company. It's a strange experience in many ways. For one thing, Japanese management style is radically different from American. In Japan, an employee is rarely fired; instead, his job is made obsolete. He's turned into a *madogiwa-zoku*, a "window-watcher." That means he's humiliated by being kept on the payroll with nothing to do except look out the window. It's corporate death row. So a high-level U.S. manager working for a Japanese company often finds it just about impossible to determine if and when one of his higher-ups has been demoted or disempowered — who the boss is now.

Instead, he must rely on one of a handful of *funin-sha*, the Japanese expatriates who are placed in the U.S. subsidiary as "moles" — spies, some say — for headquarters. Their job is to report back to Tokyo what's really going on. But they're also quite helpful to American managers as back-channels: they can help explain the maddeningly opaque politics and advise how to convey a request in an effective, artful way.

Some American executives working for Japanese corporations find themselves eased out because the Japanese don't like their style, don't like businessmen who talk too loud or use profane language. The Americans who succeed learn, too, that most real business with their bosses is conducted over dinner and beers or sake.

I spent a lot of time with salespeople and saw how similar the sales culture is to sports — it's all about competition, about winning, about being knocked down regularly and getting right back up on your feet — which is why sales managers like to recruit college athletes. Their job interviews are often antagonistic, challenging, designed to test the candidate's mettle, see how persistent he really is. A job interview, after all, is a great test of an applicant's talents: can they close the deal?

I was able to observe some of the techniques — tricks, you might say — some of the more clever salesmen have learned to use, including the “yes-set,” where you get the customer to answer “yes” to a series of small questions, softening him up for the Big Yes. Some of the really skilled salespeople have tried to learn how to read facial microexpressions in order to see whether a prospect really intends to buy; some salesmen can do this intuitively, without being trained. Naturally, angling for a promotion is another microcosm of the “sell” — you must enlist support and use your best closing techniques to convince your boss that you deserve the raise. The top salesmen regularly win trips to places like Grand Cayman or Whistler, win tickets to the Superbowl or the World Series, and some of them can even earn more money than their CEO. But it takes a certain, very special personality type — one who has, as they put it, the “killer instinct.”