

## THE GOLDEN ORB: PRELUDE – VOL. 1

### CHAPTER THREE

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Surrounded by chilled air, Kepler walks in what he deemed the perfect jacket. Black in color, light to carry, and more insulating than even the most cotton-padded jacket interiors. He arrives to the side of a gray four-door sedan and knocks on the passenger side window after looking around to see if he had been followed. The doors are unlocked, and he enters the vehicle.

Kepler now sits beside the driver, Thomas Soto, a high school senior. He sports a beard despite the clean-shaven dress code standards of their school, Cooper Academy. Thomas spent his free time either with his family, friends, or spying on people. This was a way he got paid by teenage students and adults alike to investigate anything they asked to, a suspected infidelity, false insurance claims, the undisciplined actions of immature teenagers, and even the whereabouts of alleged drug criminals. However, he enjoyed all aspects of this, the tailing, the stakeouts, the danger, to the point that he did it for fun and his own amusement in his downtime. On one of his own personal ventures, he found the principal of his school out with a mistress of his own. He used this as leverage to be able to wear his beard in whichever way he wanted despite being against school dress code. He could have asked for money but instead decided to bask in the simple pleasures and luxuries of life.

“My sister tells me that you got into an argument at school today,” Thomas tells Kepler upon his entrance.

Kepler laughs. “It was a funny argument like something out of a John Hughes movie. Do we know where we’re headed?”

“Yes, we do.” Thomas puts the vehicle in drive and departs from the sidewalk side.

In a different neighborhood, Thomas and Kepler are now parked having a vantage point on a house. Two cars are parked outside it.

“He’s meeting with his friend,” Thomas says. “He should be out at any moment now.”

Another high school senior exits the home. This high school student, Jonathan Barden, warily heads to his vehicle and enters it. He drives off.

“Let’s go,” Kepler says.

On the other side of the road right beside the sidewalk, at an angle ahead of the area where Jonathan’s car once stood, Thomas starts the car, and they tail behind Jonathan’s burner sedan. Jonathan’s vehicle enters the parking lot of an apartment building later in the night. Thomas and Kepler park away from the complex in a spot where they would be able to see the sketchy teenager’s next departure. Kepler looks up at the fifth floor of the building. He sees a

young woman, Eva, close the open curtains of one of the room units upon her sight of Jonathan's Chevrolet Malibu.

"I thought you said tonight would be the night," Kepler says.

"That's what the intel told us," Thomas responds.

"So, why am I sitting outside while he takes one of his little trips?"

"I don't know. We know he can only come out of there." Thomas points at the single exit of the apartment complex's gated parking lot.

"I know, I'm the one who did the leg work when he first met the girl."

"Mm."

"I'm gonna go to sleep. Wake me up when he leaves." Kepler crosses his arms and begins to get comfortable in his seat.

"Oh, come on."

"Just wake me up when he leaves." Kepler shuts his eyes as he attempts to fall asleep.

Thomas shakes Kepler awake. "He's on the move! The girl's still inside."

Thomas starts his burner car, and it drives forward, following Jonathan.

Jonathan's sedan enters a light rail park and ride lightly layered by the early rays of morning sun and stops here. Thomas must drive his silver Volkswagen Jetta through the same roundabout that the Malibu traveled through but takes a different exit to avoid suspicion. He turns into the back parking lot of a fast-food restaurant to park beside a trash dumpster. They are now right across the street from the light rail parking location where Thomas settles the Volkswagen Jetta facing the parking lot.

Jonathan exits his sedan with serious bravado. He walks toward a group of other approaching young adults. Thomas views Jonathan approaching the three other young people through a pair of binoculars. He hands them over to Kepler.

Jonathan and the criminal soldiers on the Barden family payroll all converge together at a single point within the parking lot. Among them are Marc and Emme, Jonathan's two right-hand people, with the third person being Jessica.

"What do you have for me?" Jonathan asks in his tense voice.

Thomas and Kepler watch from afar as the four of them discuss information and best steps forward. Kepler lowers his binoculars and looks at Abby's older brother.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen him conduct business without his father,” Kepler says. “Do you think he’s already taking over?”

“I doubt it,” Thomas says with grave concern. “But it’s something to look into.”

They turn back to look at the four seemingly normal, organized, and young adults talking together in the distance.