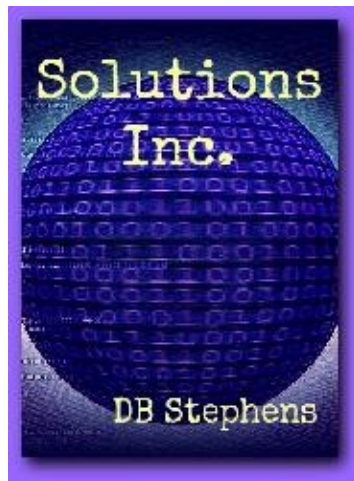


Solutions Inc.

By : **DB Stephens**

The idea of a hostile takeover has been taken to an extreme and disgraced ex-marine Bucky James finds himself killing men in suits and ties, rather than the boots and brass he is used to. His moral compass is spinning out of control and the only solution he can devise involves yet another murder. Can he take control of his life once again and win back the woman who left him for another? Can he stand up to his psychopathic boss and prevail? Will he ever be able to live with himself again? The Final Solution is a roller coaster ride of action and emotion with a good portion of suspense to quicken the pace.



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The trail took another turn up the Virginia mountain side. Bucky ignored the pain in his side and the thumping in his head, as he continued up yet another switchback. Halfway to the next turn, he was bent over, trying desperately to breathe. *My God!* he thought, *I'm gonna die on this fucking trail, before I even make it to the damned tree!*

Fading light filtered through passing clouds and the few leaves that clung to naked trees, which gave him a sense of urgency - he wanted to reach his goal before the cold November sun went down and climbing the huge oak became impossible.

Double time, the thirty-eight year old ex-marine told himself, before picking up the pace. He was soon gasping breath again. *I guess this is what I get for sitting on my ass for two years. And I imagine the booze and the coke didn't help things either. Maybe I'll have a fucking heart attack and I won't even need the rope.* He leaned over a rotting log and tried to force the air deep into his tight chest.

Breathe deep and try to relax. It was a mantra that his counselor had pounded into his head, when they would talk about all of his problems, and the multiple panic attacks he had experienced in the past few months.

"Try to put your problems out of your head and think about those you love," Mr. Gruber would always add. The only two people in the world who fit that description were the last two people he wanted to think about now. But the man inside who didn't want to be found hanging from a tree - the man Bucky had suppressed for nearly a week now - wouldn't let go of the thought.

Thoughts of his mother, the one woman in his life who still had faith in him, drove away the despair for a brief moment. He didn't want to hurt her or his father, but the wheels were already in motion; it was too late to stop now - or was it? *This is gonna kill both of them*, he finally admitted to himself. *All that I put them through in Afghanistan and Iraq - now this? You're a real bastard Bucky James - a real fucking bastard!*

Darkness and despair had been his companions for longer than he could remember and they weren't about to give in to sentiment and reason. *They'll get over it*, he told himself, as he gave into the darkness yet again, *they've dealt with the dishonorable discharge, the divorce and that little slut who came to my door - they'll just have to deal with this too!*

He looked up and realized that he was much closer to his goal than he thought. He was climbing the last switchback before the trail became a gentle slope along the ridgeline, which led to the peak of the mountain. The goal of his mission was now in sight. He began to quiver as his chest tightened again and a cold sweat dripped from his brow. His lungs were burning and legs felt like lead, but he knew he didn't have far to go now and soon he would be free from all of the pain that he had lived with for so long. He forced himself up the last switchback and marched like a soldier to battle towards the *old friend* that would hold his last breath.

The tree stood out as a giant among mortals, on the apex of the ridge he was ascending. The giant Live Oak was ancient and it dwarfed all the maples, dogwoods, hemlocks and birches which surrounded it. The base of the massive tree was so large that a young Bucky James and three of his hunting buddies had once tried to see if they could form a human chain around the trunk and they ended up being at least one hunter short. From this huge foundation, the trunk went up only ten feet before it split into five branches. One of the trunk sized

branches shot off from the tree at an unnatural angle and extended twenty feet from the tree, where it bowed to the weight of the thousands of capillaries it supported and rested on the ground. It had been an easy way to scale the giant when Bucky and his father first discovered the tree at eight years of age. Later on, the *ladder branch*, would offer up an irresistible vantage point to sit and wait for an unsuspecting deer to pass below.

The ancient oak had been instrumental in the formation of the nickname that ten year old Paul James acquired. He had been out with his father on his very first deer hunt with his brand new thirty-aught-six, sitting in the crux of three large branches, when the largest buck to ever grace the mountains of Bath County Virginia strutted up the very trail he was now walking. The shot went clean through the heart and dropped the magnificent animal where it stood. In an instant a ten year old legend was born.

His father, who had been sitting on a branch on the opposite side of the tree, hailed him the "Mighty Buck Slayer". Other names soon followed. "Sure-shot James", "The Buckmaster" and "Buck-boy", which young Paul hated, were among the many names that were spawned as a result of the kill. After a while everyone just called him "Bucky". It only seemed fitting that the he would choose this tree to put an end to Paul *Bucky* James.

The old leather rucksack he carried on his back fell to the ground in front of the huge trunk and its sole occupant, a bright red polypropylene rope, came out. He stared at the rope for a few moments, as he worked to steady his hands and his breathing. Its rough, sharp lines and stiff ways made him wish he had taken the time to seek out a softer rope to hang himself with. Perhaps a hemp rope or cotton rope like he used to use on the farm; they were strong enough if you got them thick, but the hardware store had just these cheap, rough plastic ropes on its shelves - at least it was incredibly strong. If only he hadn't stormed out of the house and left all of his worldly possessions behind the day he walked in on his ex-wife Juliet and that scum bag. There were yards of dynamic rope in the garage with all of his military stuff, but somehow most of his stuff got *misplaced* when the divorce was finalized and the house was sold. It was pure luck that his rucksack was stashed behind the seat of his pickup or he probably would have lost that too.

He scoffed at his musings, as he realized how silly it was to worry about having a *comfortable rope* to hang himself with - soon he wouldn't feel a thing.

He took a deep breath as he scaled the make-shift ladder up to the confluence of trunk sized branches. Steadying himself with smaller limbs, he moved to a spot that was clear of any other branch. Because of the slope he was on and the drop off of the hill, he was now more than thirty feet from the ground. At this height he figured that he could give himself about fifteen feet of rope and the force of two hundred thirty five pounds falling from such a height would snap his neck like a twig. He wouldn't have to worry about feeling the rope cut into his neck or gasping for his last breath - it would all be over in a matter of seconds.

Bucky unfurled the rope and let one end fall to the ground below, while the other end he grabbed and stretched across his broad chest six times before draping it over the middle of the three branches. The long end was pulled back up the tree and wrapped five times around the first branch, as he formed a rolling bend knot. The shorter end of the rope was pulled back into the tree and crafted into a very convincing hangman's noose. Each of the thirteen loops was meticulously wrapped and held firm next to its predecessor until the end of the rope was slipped through the loop at the top and pulled tight. He took the noose and placed it over his head before pulling it tight against his neck, with the large knot in the back.

Up to this point the mission had gone as planned. Alongside his wedding band, a letter had been left, which told Jules that he still loved her and wished things had gone better after he left the corps. He made out checks to cover as much of his bills as he could pay and left him with a zero balance in his bank account. The bills were put in the mail along with a letter addressed to Detective Miller, Leesburg Police Department, which he had printed out from his parents' computer the day before, while they were watching 'Dancing with the Stars'.

The letter read:

Detective Miller,

I know that my suicide will make my guilt seem to be indisputable, but I assure you that you will be doing the world an injustice if you do not continue to investigate this case. Miss Johnson, *if that is her real name*, is lying and I can only believe that I have not been her only victim. There are probably many other men who she has been able to blackmail into paying her what she asked. Even though we are both under court orders to refrain from communicating with each other, a note, which you will find on the table in my apartment, was slipped under my door yesterday. It informed me that she would now drop the charges if I pay her \$50K instead of her last demand for \$100K. I know that she will deny printing out this note. As you can see from this letter it is possible for me to have printed it. But my desire in sending you this letter before I die is not to clear my name - it is to put behind bars an evil young woman who doesn't care whose life she brings to ruin.

How someone can be so cold-hearted as to knock on a man's apartment door, pretend to be selling magazine subscriptions and then, when he goes to his desk for his checkbook, barge into his apartment, tear her own shirt, cry for help, and claim sexual assault, is completely beyond me. Detective Miller, this is truly what happened. I have no reason now to lie about this - the newspapers will spin my suicide as a man consumed by guilt, so I know that anything that you uncover concerning Miss Johnson will not absolve my guilt in the public eye. But you can prevent any other men's lives from being ruined if you look into this and put that evil young woman behind bars.

Respectfully yours;

Paul James

With all of his final preparations in order, Bucky made the four hour journey to Bath County and the dirt road, which led him to the trail and the tree. Now the only thing left was to jump.

It had to be as simple and easy as squeezing the trigger on his M16 - didn't it? He looked down at the loop of rope that swayed gently with the breeze. The daylight was fading fast and he could barely make out a thicket of gooseberries beyond the tree. *Just let go of the branch and jump; just like squeezing the trigger* - but it wasn't and he was damned if he could figure out why.

He had seen scores of men die - many at his own hand - and held the hand of more than a few Marines as they breathed their last, and he had honestly thought that it would be as easy as following an order to charge into enemy fire - but somehow it was far more difficult. He wasn't afraid to die; there had been way too many situations in the corps where that would have gotten everyone killed. There was just this ridiculously stubborn man inside who simply wasn't ready to give up on life.

Bucky sat down on the branch, with his feet dangling over the edge and he began to go over all of the reasons why he needed to die.

There was the wasted lifetime of service and sacrifice to the military - the same military that paraded him before a stacked panel of officers who seemed hell bent on believing everyone else's version of the facts other than his and then booted him out of the service without as much as a "thank you" or a pension. There were the four men who were captured and then murdered at the hands of insurgents because of his orders. And there were the nightmares he had had ever since. There was the loss of his dear and beloved son Mark - which led to the loss of his wife. There was the fact that he couldn't seem to hold down a job, even when he tried. And his bills - there was no way that he would ever be able to put a dent in the debt he owed with what he was able to occasionally bring in. And of course there was this little thing with Candice Johnson. It was the most

humiliating point of his life to have to call his parents and explain to them why he needed them to come bail him out of jail. *What kind of son would ask his father to mortgage his recently paid off home to keep his own ass out of jail?*

From the moment he had decided *the world would be a better place without Bucky James*, he had approached his suicide with a detached determination of a soldier on an important mission, as if his *success* would mean the end of a very costly war. He had learned early on in his military career that emotions only got in the way, and the only feeling he ever paid attention to was what he called "his gut instinct", which had saved his life more than once. The lingering thought of his parents, and what they would have to go through dealing with his suicide, pulled a much different trigger than he had expected. Like a can full of spring loaded snakes, emotions sprung from deep within his soul. All at once shame, guilt, fear, despair and sorrow consumed his mind and his heart. His shoulders began shake, as sobs of pain racked his body and exited through his eyes. As if on cue, the sky opened up and began to pour out tears of its own, while the tortured soul sitting on the tree branch, lamenting his lot in life, was oblivious of the rain which began to fall on his head.

After several minutes - *or was it several hours?* - of weeping, he wiped the tears from his eyes and realized that it was raining. The temperature had dropped to forty two degrees and he was now shivering from the rain and the sweat that soaked his red plaid shirt and jeans. For a few moments he just sat thereâ shaking and staring at the void between heaven and hell without a thought or an emotionâ numbness had taken control of his heart again and he wasn't quite sure whether or not he had already jumped off of the branch or not. If not for the constant shaking from the cold, he would have guessed he had already died, and he was now a ghost sitting on his old haunt. The thought seemed so possible that he glanced at his feet to see if he could watch his own body swaying below him; a bloodcurdling cry from the sky above snapped him out of the delusion.

Bucky scanned the skies for the author of the baleful note, which had brought him back to reality. The cold rain stung his eyes as he strained to catch a glimpse of the magnificent bird that had to be the owner of such a powerful voice. At last, with the help of the final few rays of daylight, through the branches to his left, he saw the great bird. A Golden Eagle, with its huge six foot wingspan, was hovering high in the sky. A few moments of graceful gliding ended when the raptor's wings seemed to collapse, as the eagle plunged to the earth with the grace and speed of one of nature's greatest aerial predators. He had a difficult time following the line of the bird through the branches of the tree and lost sight of it completely when it got close to the ground. A few moments later it was flapping its wings towards the sky with a rabbit held by one of its deadly talons.

The eagle flew straight for the large oak that he was sitting in. Perhaps it was going to choose one of the high up branches in which to enjoy its evening meal. He watched intently as this welcomed distraction played out before him. The bird was almost directly above him now and for some reason his attention was drawn to the poor creature held in the grasp of the great predator. The rabbit's eyes were wide open with a look of shock and fear and, in a last ditch effort to live, it began to jerk furiously, as if it were trying to run in place fifty feet above the ground. The eagle wasn't prepared for the rabbit's dying fight. The victim slipped out of the bird's grasp and fell to the ground; spinning and bouncing off of a few of the oak tree's branches, as it made its way back to earth.

The rabbit lay in place where it landed, while the eagle made a big swooping circle to take a second stab at securing its dinner. Bucky watched the victim for any signs of life, while keeping an eye on the big bird, as it circled back in for the kill. The rabbit appeared to be bleeding from its hind quarters and it was either already dead from the fall or had gone into shock and was just waiting to die. For a moment he identified with the poor animal, which had been unlucky enough to be plucked away from its family while out trying to make a living. Bad luck had taken him for a ride and was soon to be the reason for his exit from this world too. The eagle came in low under the tree and extended its broad wings fully, as it put on the brakes and thrust its talons at the lifeless bunny. A second before impact the rabbit suddenly sprang to life and zigzagged along the ground with lightning speed before disappearing into a thicket of gooseberries to the left of the oak. The

large predator circled above the tree for a few moments before flapping its wings in pursuit of better hunting.

A profound feeling of shame came over the once proud soldier. Here was a simple harmless animal - an animal that was one step up the food chain from grass - a little bunny rabbit - and it had showed him up. The little insignificant creature had shown a hunger to live that had bested one of nature's best equipped predators and his victory made Bucky doubt his whole mission - *plan* or whatever the hell had made him sit there in a tree with a rope around his neck. *If that little rodent can struggle to make it in this world, why can't I?* Once Bucky had been the eagle and his prey would have never been allowed the second chance that this little rabbit had received. And now... now he was acting like a scared rabbit hiding in a tree waiting to die. Bucky removed the noose from around his neck and let it fall; then he untied it from the tree, wound it around his left palm and elbow, before tossing it to the ground below.

It now dawned on him why he was not able to pull the trigger on his own death. For two years he had been acting like prey; sitting back and just waiting for life to pass him by, while everyone around him took advantage of him like a toothless lion. Candice Johnson must have sensed it when she came to his door that day. She was a predator, *the worse kind of predator*, and had moved in for the kill without hesitation. Maybe if he hadn't been acting like a scared rabbit he might have recognized the hunger in her eyes before she had sprung her trap; instead, he just rolled over and offered up his belly to her attack. *I'll bet that if I had \$20,000 in the bank like she demanded that day, I would have driven straight to the bank.* The thought made him grind his teeth and stop shivering for a moment. Paul Bucky James was not prey; he was a predator who had forgotten who he was and what made him tick. The Marine Corps had kicked him out of his hunting grounds, declawed and defanged him, but they hadn't taken away his desire for the kill - he had done that himself. It was time to turn the tables on life and become a predator once again. The man inside was finally in control.

Getting out of the oak tree proved to be much more difficult than getting up it; the bark was now wet and as slippery as ice, which made for a slow treacherous climb. Bucky's training kicked in and he was able to control his desire to shiver long enough to steady his steps to the point where he could easily drop down to the ground. The rope was put back in the rucksack, which was then hung on his back for the two mile journey back to his truck. The temperature had dropped a few more degrees, while a steady downpour of ice cold rain continued to fall. It would be dark soon and Bucky knew that he would be putting himself in danger of slipping into hypothermia if he didn't double time it back to his vehicle. So he hustled back down the trail, away from the place where he had almost made the final mistake of his miserable life.

Hiking now felt like the most wonderful thing in the world; it warmed his body and reminded him that he was still alive. He was breathing deep - breathing in the life he had almost cast away in despair. *I'm such an idiot* - he began to think. *Nope - not gonna go there. 'Only positive thoughts', as Mr. Gruber would say. I'm the luckiest man alive right now. I've got nowhere to go but up from here.*

As he headed back down the mountain, the thought of *getting back in the game* was all the ex-marine could think about. A few months after he had left the corps, Dave Carter, an old Desert Storm buddy, called him and offered him a job with a security firm of old war vets that worked in Iraq. At the time, Bucky was so sick of Iraq, and what had happened there to get him kicked out of the marines, that he didn't even take a minute before he told Dave, "There is no way in hell that I would go back to that shit hole - not for all the gold bars on Saddam's truck!"

I wonder if that offer is still good.

A sobering thought brought a dark cloud over his new found optimism.

They're not going to want some pervert running around Iraq with a gun - especially considering my discharge papers.

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There had to be someone else who that little tramp had pulled her little act on; maybe he could hire a private investigator to check into her background - every penny he owned would soon be drained from his account and he couldn't ask his parents for more money. Well, maybe justice would prevail - something he very much doubted - and he would avoid any jail time.

Even if I do end up in prison, prisons are full of predators and I can get a chance to hone my rusty skills. I'm sure that any company that puts Dave in charge of anything could care less about a prison record.

Nothing was going to get in the way of Bucky James now - the soldier was back.

The last half mile back to his truck was pure torture. Besides freezing from being soaked to the bone in a thirty eight degree climate, he was starving and exhausted. He hadn't eaten all day and the months of distressed sleep, which never left him feeling rested, were taking their toll. He had slipped a couple of times in the failing light and was now a muddy, dripping, weary mess. At last his faded blue and primer grey truck could be seen alone at the edge of the dark dirt road where he had left it. The sight of the thirty-five year old Ford brought immediate relief to the enervated soldier and he jogged the last fifty yards to the driver's side door.

His old faithful companion roared to life with a quick flip of the wrist, then he turned on the cab light so that he could adjust the climate controls to full red, as he waited for the truck to warm up. As he sat, shivering behind the wheel, watching the temperature gauge for any signs of movement, his eyes were drawn to something that was stuck under the driver's side windshield wiper. He leaned forward to get a better look at what appeared to be a business card inserted beneath the blade of the wiper, like an advertisement left by some solicitor. His pulse began to race and his chest tightened, as he studied the little white card and was overcome by its significance.

He was at the end of a dirt road, which many of the locals didn't even know about, miles from any form of civilization and someone had stopped to put his business card under his wiper? There was no way that the card could have been there when he left Leesburg six hours ago. He would have surely noticed it or the freeway speeds would have sent it fluttering in the wind if he had somehow missed it. He fumbled with the door latch before leaping out of the truck to retrieve the card.

He held a deep breath to steady his shivering hands long enough to read the small card. No name or business was on the face of it; only a few words and a phone number marred its stark white surface:

Life is but a vapor -

do not make it vanish before its time.

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