Sweeper

Stephen Younts

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This book is dedicated to my loving wife,
Susan Younts.

Her enjoyment of reading
and support of my effort gave me
the drive to complete this novel.

Sweeper

Chapter 1

To: jco@comsat721.com
From: cathy@aerolink1020.net
Subject: Date?

Jacob,

Would you be up for a drink? Time and location of your choice. Just make sure you select a spot with an effervescent atmosphere. Hope we can get together in a timely fashion.

Cathy

*****

Adrenaline began pulsing through his veins.

As Jacob Cohen eased back from his laptop screen, the digital glow displayed a tight smile growing across his face. With a deep inward breathe, he arched back in his chair and collected his thoughts while focusing on the cabin ceiling of his yacht. The anticipation of such an email had finally come to an end - an email that could begin a new chapter in his recently quiet life - an email that could also write the final chapter of his very existence.

“Cathy, it’s been quite some time”.

After cracking each knuckle of his hands in an almost rhythmic fashion, Jacob turned his attention to the screen. How many Internet servers in the world had bounced this single email before it finally

came to rest in his possession, with each server making it more difficult to trace its digital journey? Its origin grabbed his thoughts, but he was fully aware that such ponderings were not worth his energy. The “from” domain was almost certainly fabricated.

“Ah ... effervescent atmosphere”.

The phrase was not just a description of a desired locale, but two very important keywords that brought a whole new perspective on the correspondence. A message that merely reflected a personal tone to any spying eye, Jacob knew the phrase established a business atmosphere between only the parties that shared it. It was a business where few cared to tread ... the business of death.

With an acute focus and a quick click of the reply button, Jacob began pecking away at the keyboard. Typing was not one of his strong points, since his paranoia of electronic communication kept his skills to a minimum. The trace ability of such communications always concerned him, with his preference for verse between one another being face-to-face; however, meetings offered one dilemma - anyone in the world knew exactly where you were at a specific time, including those who may want to kill you.

*****

To: cathy@aerolink1020.net
From: jco@comsat721.com
Subject: Re:Date?

Cathy,

It would be my pleasure to share a drink with you. Shall we try for this

upcoming Saturday at the Riverwatch Restaurant? I could do 7:30 PM. I hear their Maryland crab cakes are to die for, probably the best in the USA.

Jacob

*****

Three quick checks of the reply email provided Jacob the assurance that the message was ready for the send button. Meeting reply messages had to comply with certain protocol when communicating with the “Organization”, or more affectionately known as the “The Org” to Jacob. With his whereabouts in the world being unknown to anyone in his particular business community, Jacob had to specify both country and state in all meeting replies. His keywords lay in the description of a local food that is always “to do die for”; a phrase that he hopes never proves to be true, at least on his end.

Waiting for the reply seemed like an eternity, although it would only turn out to be less than five minutes. The Org had someone perched on the opposite computer on no less than a twenty-four seven basis, and Jacob knew the words “timely fashion” in the previous email meant urgency. The wait offered him a chance to browse through the address book of his PDA, focusing on one particular entry only listed as “PTeam”, when his laptop signaled an incoming message.

*****

To: jco@comsat721.com
From: cathy@aerolink1020.net

Subject: Re:Re:Date?

Jacob,

Once again, an excellent choice. I'll be sure to wear your favorite dress. You've always liked yellow and purple.

Cathy

*****

"I actually do like yellow and purple".

As long as Jacob knew whom to look for, it really didn't matter. "Cathy" was continually a different person throughout the history of such meetings, but each individual carried the same mission; to offer him a job that no one else cared to perform, or had the necessary skills to complete. Carrying out such work rarely sent his heart rate as high as it would be over the next few days while anticipating the meeting. Jacob reached for his PDA again, knowing that he had to replace apprehension with preparation.

"Mr. Charlie, are you in there?"

Jacob instantly reeled into action, closing the email window of his laptop, and then opening a program that contained an intricate, radar-like screen. He could hear the slight hum of a small dish above deck that rapidly performed a full 360 degree scan of the outside world, and then reported individual human objects back to his laptop in less than fifteen seconds. The voice came from the object directly outside his boat standing on the pier, but a second object was placed on a walk out pier behind a boat approximately thirty-five feet away. Jacob's

heightened level of security concern was common after communicating with the Org.

“Mr. Charlie?”

Recognizing the voice to be that of a very active eight-year-old named Tommy, Jacob turned his thoughts to the second radar object. A Tuesday afternoon rarely turned up much traffic on the docks of Gunpowder Cove Marina, so who was there? He swiftly removed a silencer equipped Sig-Sauer pistol from under the galley table and shoved it into the back of his khakis. After throwing on an oversized, button-down shirt, he moved toward the cabin door. Jacob stepped up to the helm deck level with his left shoulder forward, while holding the grip of his weapon in his right hand behind him. Surrounded by bulletproof glass on three sides of the helm deck, Jacob slowly eased toward the open aft deck.

As the humid, Maryland air of July brushed his face, Jacob’s peripheral vision caught the sight of Tommy, but his primary focus was in the direction of the second object. Whoever it was, they were concealed by a thirty-eight foot cabin cruiser, a beautifully restored boat belonging to old man Jenkins. Jenkins was out of town until the following week.

“Hi Mr. Charlie!”

“Hello Tommy. What can I do for you?”

For a brief moment, Jacob felt guilty for the identity deception he had been using on not only Tommy, but also anyone he came in contact with during his nine months at the marina. Tommy was truly a symbol of innocence to Jacob, a state that he often wished he could recapture, but Jacob realized the deception was for the best for everyone as the truth could be hazardous for all parties involved. A dangerous state of mind snapped back into Jacob as he observed the

head of the human object peak up over the boat, sporting a black baseball cap with dark sunglasses. Jacob tightened his grip on the Sig-Sauer.

“My dad wanted to know if you would like to go crabbing with us tomorrow morning. He just finished reworking all his traps, and the john boat is all gassed up and ready to go,” Tommy expressed in an excited voice.

Once again, the individual of Jacob’s focus peered over the boat edge. Jacob couldn’t imagine trouble erupting with Tommy so close. He tried to move to a better vantage point on his yacht’s aft deck, but shade from a nearby sailboat further concealed the object’s identity.

“What do ya say Mr. Charlie? Looks like their calling for good weather.”

Suddenly, the individual stepped from behind Jenkins‘ boat, slowly venturing out into the sun. Jacob began removing the pistol from the back of his pants. It was not suppose to be this way. This spot was a safe haven for Jacob during his current work hiatus. Before the last portion of the silencer cleared the back of his khakis for complete removal, Jacob spotted the face of the individual enter the direct sunlight. It was Bradley, Jenkins’ eldest son. He slowly replaced the pistol in its previous position and breathed a sigh of relief, almost positive Tommy didn’t see the gun, as it was kept behind his shirt the entire time. Bradley moved to the side of his dad’s cruiser which was closest to Jacob, inspecting the deck covering.

“Is everything ok, Mr. Charlie?” Tommy inquired.

“Sure son. Just lost in thought for a moment. Tell your dad I’m up for it. What time does he want to leave the docks?”

Tommy’s face lit up. “Bout five AM. See ya Mr. Charlie!”

Tommy turned and ran up the pier towards his dad’s houseboat,

an ancient behemoth that was their residence throughout the year. His mop of red hair bounced all around as he skipped over the newly replaced boards of the pier deck. Jacob would occasionally watch Tommy in the Spring months after school, helping Tom's dad while he was at work, and enjoying Tommy's company since he was not working during that timeframe. Most of their time together was spent fishing. The young boy's mom passed away from cancer over a year ago, leaving his dad with responsibilities he wasn't quite ready to fully assume. Jacob felt like a second father to Tom, the child he never had from the family he always wanted.

"I have to relax," Jacob mumbled to himself.

Taking a minute to survey the marina, Jacob noted the overall serenity. All was quiet except for the occasional sounds of a passing gull, and the soothing tempo of the waves lapping against the boats. From a distance, he could see the older children playing tennis on the courts across the water. The sound of wind chimes could be heard as they danced in the steady bay breeze. For the most part, it was a very peaceful setting that gave one plenty of time to think and reflect upon their life, sometimes too much time.

Located in the quiet area of Joppatowne in Harford County, Maryland, Gunpowder Cove Marina was home to almost three hundred boat slips. A quick trip through the Gunpowder River and nearby train drawbridge provided easy access to Maryland's jewel, the Chesapeake Bay. Mostly calm Monday through Friday, which happened to be Jacob's preferred time, the docks bustled on weekends with families enjoying their watercrafts after a long workweek. It was that time that Jacob chose to enjoy weekend land trips out of the area. Unlike many of the super marinas, Gunpowder Cove lacked elaborate swimming pools and resort facilities. It was

strictly geared towards boating, and Summer time filled the docks with a variety of watercraft, including Jacob's newest asset.

Docked at the end of the closet pier to the bay, where slips reside that were reserved for larger vessels, was Jacob's home - a Sabreline Express forty-two foot yacht. With a base price of nearly a half of a million dollars, and almost an equal amount in security upgrades, the vessel stood out within its society. The low-profile cabin top and classic down east lines were accentuated with bright white decks and navy blue sides. Twin four hundred and forty horsepower Yanmar six cylinder diesel engines added solid performance to its beauty. With all the amenities of home, ownership allowed him to roam freely when considering the nature of his business, or especially when his current environment was getting too close for comfort.

Realizing he had unfinished business at hand, Jacob entered the cabin and secured the door. He placed the pistol snuggly in its home and turned his attention toward an aesthetic panel below the thirty-six inch, high definition television. With a calculated press on the panel's upper and lower right hand corners, it gave way to reveal a private storage area. Jacob removed a black canvas bag and placed it on the galley table. Within the bag, he retrieved a satellite phone and connected it to one of the ship's many communication ports. A quick browse of his PDA's address book brought him back to the phone listing for "PTeam", setting his fingers in motion on the satellite phone's keypad.

"Hello. This is Robert Arnold. Prepare to switch to encryption mode on ... 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, go," Jacob said very slowly.

The audio then switched to a very tinny, slightly echoing sound. Jacob relaxed and went into his normal voice.

"Good afternoon, Felix. I will need to establish a protection team

for the evening of this upcoming Saturday at the Riverwatch Restaurant in Baltimore Maryland ...”

Chapter 2

Standing in the shower, the water had a calming effect on Jacob's face as he closed his eyes and went into a meditation like state. Saturday, and his meeting with the Org had arrived quicker than he wished and he was mentally traveling through each anticipated detail of the evening, every possible scenario carefully played out with the Org. For every action, he planned at least three reactions, each necessary in a possible fatal situation. A seven mile run earlier in the day helped to flush his mind, along with his daily regiment of herbs for further enhancement of his instinctive reflexes. He was the best in his profession on a solo basis, but a team player he was not.

As Jacob stepped out of the shower, he faced the mirror and slowly came back to the land of the living. While his years of forty-two began to show slight age around his eyes, his jet black, full head of hair and athletic, slightly olive skinned body hid his years well. He peered deep into the reflection of his eyes, which were a key signature of his appearance; his left eye was brown, but his right eye was brown with a fair amount of gray. Living with the thought of being some mutation, he wore a color corrective contact lens in that eye for the better part of his life. While the eye color affected his aesthetics, its focal functionality was beyond that of any other human being, so he accepted the good with the bad.

Opening his make-up case, Jacob began his transformation. A heavy splash of gray powder through his hair with a bonding coating of spray aged him by ten years. He applied a matching mustache and side burns as well. All aesthetic changes not only had to comply with his plans with the protection team, but also would need to be

removable within a two-minute timeframe.

“Not bad for fifty-two,” he said with a chuckle.

Jacob began to suit up. Beyond the under garments, he wore a very lightweight, Kevlar covering over his torso, legs, and arms for bullet protection. Next, a collarless black shirt went on, and then he carefully situated a holster which would house not one, but two Sig-Sauer pistols and silencers on his lower back. The reach distance had to be almost perfect for each hand. He carried multiple clips of bullets towards the sides of his back, a razor sharp knife on the lower part of his calf, a radio frequency signal detector in his pocket, and a global positioning system attached to his belt. Two last additions were a small flash grenade and a smoke bomb. Finally, he encased his arsenal with lightweight black pants and a gray jacket.

With less than two hours until seven thirty PM, Jacob knew it was time to move. Total professionalism was the key, and nothing could be taken for granted. After a sweep of the radar turned up an empty pier, Jacob went to the aft deck to get a visual of the area. The coast was clear. He initiated the security sequence of the Sabreline and moved up the pier towards the parking lot. He took a last look at his yacht before entering his leased Suburban.

The road trip was only twenty-five minutes long, with his first destination being the parking garage of Towsontown Center, just north of Baltimore City. Once there, Jacob parked on level A1, ascended the stairs to reach A2, and surveyed the parking terrace near the Rainforest Cafe for the protection team pick-up man. His only description of the individual was that he would be wearing a black New York Yankees baseball cap and t-shirt, which was not a good idea considering the local Baltimore Oriole rivalry. Jacob kept his distance from the area until finally sighting the individual, and then

confronted him. Neither man spoke to one another as the pick-up man took the lead and both entered a vehicle that Jacob recognized as a heavily modified, white Cadillac Escalade, with extremely dark, tinted windows. As he opened the passenger door, a folder was present on the seat, awaiting his review.

Not a word was said between the two during the ride to the Riverwatch Restaurant, with hardly a glance in the other's direction. Jacob opened the folder which revealed photos of the team who would be directly involved in his safety. He carefully studied each individual, memorizing his or her image, and then handed the folder to the driver.

Jacob's selection of the Riverwatch Restaurant for the meeting was simple. He was very familiar with its layout, as he had eaten there numerous times during his nine months in the area. It offered exits by both land and water, considering it had a reasonably sized marina attached. In regards to safety, the more people the better, as he was aware they offered live entertainment every Saturday evening, which always brought in a good crowd. The weekend transient boaters would be sure to fill the site as well. Although he would not be dining during this visit, they really did have a crab cake that was to die for.

In Jacob's mind, the twenty-minute ride felt like five.

As the Summer sun was in the last leg of its journey towards the horizon, storm clouds began to mount on the southwestern sky. The Riverwatch Restaurant was in full swing with its dinner crowd and gearing up for the night life scene. Nestled at the end of Nanticoke Road, a tree bordered street which was barely wide enough to allow two cars to pass, the site was somewhat secluded within a wooded setting that opened to the Chesapeake Bay. Both the parking lot and

marina were in full capacity, as folks walked the grounds and enjoyed the views across the water. On the dining deck, located between the restaurant and marina, a band offered their impression of Jimmy Buffet songs to the casual dining customers. On weekends, a second band changed the patron's focus to modern dance music in the lounge during the latter evening.

On the outer perimeter of the parking lot, within feet of the surrounding foliage, two men sat quietly in a dark blue, Dodge Ram truck. Carefully positioned, they had the viewpoint of both the parking lot entrance, and the restaurant front door. The subtle glow of a myriad of communications equipment mounted on the dashboard barely showed their faces in the dark surroundings. The driver was an elder member of the Organization, working within the group for nearly twenty-four years. His passenger could easily be described as a rookie, barely beyond legal drinking age, both carefully and impatiently watching his mentor.

"Why all this artillery?" the rookie inquired, his voice somewhat unsure of what his mind was mulling.

After a long silence, the elder turned to him, looked him directly in the eye and blurted "You really don't have a clue, do you?"

The elder placed his concentration back on the communications equipment. All was quiet as over ten members were positioned within the building's surroundings, and another five within the restaurant. The elder removed his microphone headset and turned once again.

"The artillery is all due to a misunderstanding several years ago. We were meeting with this same individual to discuss a contract. Due to his long history within this business, let's just say he's developed a number of enemies. One of those enemies somehow got wind of the meeting site and tried to retire him. Before it was all over, our guy not

only killed his attacker, but also retired three of our members in the melee that followed, thinking they were part of the assault. We're not going to let this happen again. Besides, he travels with a protection team now. We have to even the odds somehow."

The elder sat in deep thought for a moment before continuing. "This guy can vanish like a ghost. We have no true description of him anymore, other than height. I don't know what he's had altered. If for any reason we need to terminate him, these meetings are our only chance. We never know if a termination is necessary until Central gives us the word at the last second," he stated as he began placing his headset microphone in its previous position beyond his face.

"Why do we keep using him?" asked the rookie.

"Simple. He's the best," finished the elder.

They sat in silence when a voice came across the radio. "We have a white truck with darkened windows turning onto Nanticoke road. I'm not sure if this is our focus."

Sitting back in his seat, the rookie looked down at his watch. It was seven twenty-one PM, and he could feel his stomach churning. He knew it wasn't due to the bean burrito he consumed an hour and a half ago. Simply put, he truly wasn't prepared for this scenario. He thought he was taking part in a simple surveillance operation, and death was not a factor in his game plan.

The white Escalade entered the parking lot, and then slowly circled its lanes before coming to a stop across the restaurant's front entrance with the passenger's side closest to the front door. Jacob glanced across the lot one more time before exiting the vehicle and advancing towards the entrance. Getting into the building was half the battle, getting out was the other half. He opened the large wooden

door and entered the lobby before the Escalade moved for an open parking space.

Decorated in a nautical motif, the Riverwatch displayed abundant amounts of slightly darker wood, brass, and glass. The aroma of broiled seafood and the hint of Old Bay seasoning touched Jacob's nose as he ventured forward. Rather than turning left towards the hostess and the formal dining area, he went straight to the few upward steps leading to the lounge. A large square bar was situated on the left, with a casual dining area and dance floor to the right. Beyond all was the door leading to the outdoor deck and marina. A quick glance revealed two protection team members in the area, one being a bartender, and one as a patron in the casual dining area. Focusing his attention more on the bar, he observed a young woman enjoying a glass of wine, wearing a purple and yellow dress.

"Cathy, I presume," he mumbled to himself as he noticed his entrance did not catch her eye.

Jacob entered the casual dining area and seated himself in the far corner booth with his back to the wall. The wine menu provided a security blanket while he further examined his surroundings. In total, he counted three Org members within the area, or so he thought. They always seemed to stand out in a crowd. Concentrating on his breathing, he gradually went to deeper, slower breathes before feeling his heart rate decrease.

His attention traveled to the large windows that separated the interior from the deck, more specifically on a small family. The waitress brought a birthday cake out to the father's surprise as the mother and young son watched, each sporting a huge smile. Jacob got lost in the scene for several seconds before turning his focus to the other patrons. Many folks appeared to have stopped by for a bite

and drink after a beautiful Saturday on the bay, mostly dressed in casual attire.

“Did they have any idea what kind of setting they were stepping into? Maybe the keywords we use in the next email can be time bomb atmosphere,” he thought to himself. The patrons would have no idea as long as the evening went smooth.

The calm was interrupted by two boaters who appeared to be drunk as they staggered from the deck door and planted themselves at a table two away from his, almost as a barrier to the rest of the room. Being no haphazard circumstance, they were members of the protection team.

“Care for a cocktail, sir?” the waiter inquired, almost startling Jacob.

“Just a glass of your house wine please. And see the lady at the bar in the yellow and purple dress? Her name is Cathy. Would you mind asking her to join Jacob for a drink?”

Heading towards the bar, the waiter spoke to Cathy and pointed to Jacob. She grabbed her drink and walked in his direction. The first thing he noticed was her height, almost certain she was just under six foot. Her light brown hair was parted in the middle and came down slightly past her shoulders, while her bare arms displayed a very lean but muscular structure, as the same description could be applied to her legs. She was very beautiful overall, which was confirmed by the traveling eyes of the male patrons as she closed in on his table.

“Good evening, Jacob.”

“Cathy. Please have a seat,” he replied as she assumed the seat across from him. Her smell of soothing chamomile enveloped his senses.

“How are you?” She said with a smile.

Jacob's eyes swept the area, noting that all appeared to be in its proper place. As he started his reply, the waiter dropped off his glass of wine. He took a moment to look deep into its red color, making sure to leave the glass untouched with no trace of his fingerprints, and then gathered his thoughts. He began again.

"I don't think we have time for chit-chat. You have a proposal for me?"

Jacob looked directly into her brown eyes, noticing tears starting to arise as she gave him an astonished, yet slightly admiring look. He wondered why the Org involved such a young woman in a matter like this, guessing her age to be in the early twenties, then recalling the past women claiming to be Cathy as being in there mid to late thirties.

"Yes sir, I do."

She turned her concentration to her purse and removed a cocktail napkin from within, being sure to keep Jacob aware of her every move for safety sake. She scribbled a phone number on the outside for show, and then forwarded it to him.

Jacob knew the protocol. He opened the napkin to find pre-printed wording that requested the retirement of three clients within their place of business for a total of five hundred thousand dollars, and an additional proposal for the retirement of two unknown clients for a second five hundred thousand dollars, with clues to their identities to come at a later date. The location of the clients was in Conway, South Carolina, just outside the Myrtle Beach area. Urgency was required, and "sweeper" style was a must.

Knowing that the messengers never had any knowledge of the contents of their deliveries, Jacob did not ask any questions. Noting that the payout was slightly higher than past proposals, he wondered what additional dangers were involved; nonetheless, he never turned

down a reasonable offer, especially considering that the Org looked down upon such a reply - usually six feet down that is.

Cathy waited patiently for his reply, as she twirled a pen in her right hand. With a last visual sweep of the area, Jacob gave his acceptance.

“It’s a go for both projects.”

With a slight smile, she brought the motion of the pen to a stop, and then clicked it twice. Jacob knew the signal, wondering who received the pen’s digital transmission. Were they within the building, or on the parking lot, or perhaps in a boat docked in the marina? He hoped the Org members breathed a little easier with the closure of the deal, and that he was no longer in the sights of one of their snipers through the vast deck windows.

“Thank you, Jacob. Here’s a small token for your troubles.”

Cathy handed him a gray box, about the size of a salt shaker. In the transaction, Jacob felt her hand brush his but she seemed to delay its withdrawal, almost as if to prolong the contact of their skin. His mind raced with curiosity, but he knew he could not afford wasteful thoughts in this type of environment.

Lifting the box cover revealed the contents to be that of a flash memory stick, certainly containing data on the clients described in the napkin. He closed the box and kept it on the table, cradled by his hands. Cathy then offered a small piece of folded paper. Jacob began to open it when she raised her hand and mouthed the words “Not now.” He quickly slid the item under the box.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Jacob. Take care now,” she said in a voice that was generated for the crowd of listeners who were tuned into the microphone she surely wore.

Her exit was quick through the front of the building, as Jacob

reached for an item in his pocket. Holding an RF signal detector below the table line, he brought the gray box within its operating range. The device found the box and its contents to be free of any type of tracking signal, then he quickly tucked both it and paper items Cathy forwarded in his pants pocket.

Jacob signaled to the nearest protection members that it was time to move. They bumped their drunken act up a notch, as they began to argue about whose turn it was to buy the next round. Jacob moved out of the booth, and then walked briskly towards the restrooms, noting one Org member getting up from his seat and beginning to follow. The bartender hustled around the bar and blocked his way as Jacob darted into the men's room.

After locking the door behind him, Jacob placed his right hand in a ready position to remove one of the pistols. He checked all the stalls, all except for the last one which he knew would be occupied. As the stall door opened, a protection member walked forward with a striking resemblance to Jacob, dressed in a beige summer suit. Their smiles displayed their familiarity with one another, telling the story of their past restroom meetings during these types of events. Realizing time was important with less than two minutes to spare, they began trading clothes. Jacob made sure he maintained possession of Cathy's offerings, placing them in his newly acquired pants. He splashed his head into the sink to remove the gray powder, and then slicked his wet hair back against his head. With his removal of the fake mustache and side burns, and their duplicates on the imposter, their transformations were complete as each easily passed for the other before they entered the restroom.

Jacob's double unlocked the door and quickly moved towards the

lobby as Jacob shuffled toward an empty stall. The double exited and made a swift trip to the waiting Escalade, climbed in, and breathed a sigh of relief. Two thousand dollars for fifteen minutes work helped make his hazardous duty pay worth it.

After a slow count to sixty, Jacob exited the restroom, crossed the lounge, and headed for the deck door, noting that the Org members were no longer within the lounge area. The “drunken” protection team members were soon following in his footsteps. He could hear the distinct rumble of racing boat engines, and knew his ride was preparing for departure. A pass through the deck dining area and out to the marina’s middle pier got his blood pumping, all the while looking side to side for trouble. A crack of thunder from a fast passing summer storm nearly caused a fall on the rain soaked dock as he mistook the sound for gunfire. Making it to the end of the pier seemed to be the longest walk of his life, but he was relieved to see the forty-five foot Sonic waiting for him. He hopped onboard and went under cover in its belly. As he slumped onto the sofa, the three, five hundred horse power Mercruiser engines came to life as they pulled away from the dock. It was almost over.

Jacob suddenly remembered the second piece of paper Cathy had given him. He retrieved the items from his pants pocket, found the paper and opened it. Its contents revealed a ten digit phone number and the word “Personal”, but no other clues. He returned the items to their previous place and drifted with the sounds of the engines. Unsure of their destination, he knew a stock Sonic 45SS was capable of 80 plus miles an hour on the open water. This modified version was running wide open, causing him to believe they were in the triple digits on the Chesapeake Bay. If only he could be above deck for the rush.

Once the boat stopped, he emerged from the cabin to see a neon

sign, “Red Eyes Dock Bar”. He knew he was on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, across the bay from his previous location, and about sixty miles south. The Sonic’s captain handed him a set of car keys and blurted “Grand Cherokee, tag NFC-874, far parking lot, map is in the glove box”.

Jacob found the vehicle and performed a sweep for tracking devices before he started the hour long journey back to Towsontown Center to retrieve his Suburban. The protection team was well worth their twenty thousand dollars, especially considering he had no new bullet holes in his body.

As he entered his Sabreline back in Joppatowne, he thought of how relieved he was to be back in his floating sanctuary, and that his planned brush with humanity was over. His secondary thought concerned Cathy’s performance tonight, and how it kept replaying in his mind. No other acted quite like her. As he placed the flash memory stick into the boat’s safe, he was unaware that the removal of it from his pocket caused the paper containing the personal phone number given to him by Cathy to fall towards the floor, coming to rest between the refrigerator’s edge and a side panel. For now, it was beyond the eye’s view.

Another sleepless night awaited him.

Waking up with thoughts of childhood summer adventures, Tommy’s Monday turned out to be fairly uneventful at its midpoint. A brown sugar cinnamon pop-tart and morning cartoons got his day off to a less than roaring start and it was almost nine thirty before he left the houseboat, venturing into the humidity of the slightly overcast day.

“Stay around the marina, Tommy,” his dad called from the shower.

Working on a rotational basis at the Allison Transmission Plant in

White Marsh, it was his father's week for second shift, which usually gave him time with his son until reporting in at two thirty in the afternoon. Tommy would then share the Ferguson's sitter for a few hours after his father dropped him off before going to work, helping to alleviate some of the summer childcare expenses. The Fergusons lived in the nearby waterfront apartments, and their parents would usually arrive home by five thirty and watch Tommy at no charge until his dad got home in the late evening. He got along great with their boys - Steven, age seven, and Scott, age nine. Their friendship worked well for the parents as well, as Tommy's presence offered a calming effect to their sons' constant bickering.

"You wanna go fishing dad?" Tommy said as he re-opened the door.

"Can't today son. I gotta catch up on some of this paperwork. Don't want to be late on the bills."

With the marina being scarce of playmates for Tommy during the week, he stopped by Jacob's boat. After his repeated knocks on the cabin door received no answer, he set off for the outdoor pool at the waterfront apartments. He usually knew someone that was willing to let him get in under his or her membership. No luck today though. The pool was empty, as were the nearby tennis and basketball courts. Tommy knew the Ferguson's kids were at baseball camp during the late morning - early afternoon time frame, so it was back to the marina to try a little solo fishing from the piers.

During the taxi drive back to the marina, Jacob itemized his list of "to do's" in preparation for departure. Today was the day he would cruise south for Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and back to work. He had already picked up groceries and miscellaneous items for the

voyage which he estimated to be about five days, with stops here and there. After dropping off his leased Suburban, it was back to the boat for his final hours in Maryland.

Jacob walked into the marina and stopped by the office to wrap up all loose ends with his slip rental, then started down the pier where the Sabreline was docked when he noticed Tommy from a distance. His pace slowed to almost a crawl, never anticipating how he would relay his leaving to a boy he almost considered to be his own.

“Hello Tommy. Any bites?”

“Hi Mr. Charlie. Wanna fish with me?”

“I wish I could son, but I have a lot to do today?” as he sat down beside Tommy on the pier.

Jacob could see the life in Tommy’s face when he joined him. Admiring his dimpled smile, Jacob noted how Tommy’s feet began to kick as they dangled over the pier’s edge. This was not going to be easy.

“Mr. Charlie, you know why I want to become a marine biologist? Cause I heard that stuff inside sea sponges might help folks with cancer. Wish I could have found that stuff before it took my mom.”

Tommy’s dream occupation surfaced many times in their conversations. Although Jacob realized Tom’s dad would most likely not be able to afford schooling for the young boy beyond his public high years, he always helped keep his ambition alive.

“Some day, you’ll make an awesome marine biologist. And I’ll try to help if I can. But for now, you just have to figure out how to get the fish to like you, because they’re sure not jumping up on the pier.”

They shared a laugh as Jacob collected his thoughts.

“Tommy, I just wanted to let you know, I have to sail out tonight for a business trip up in Boston.”

“Wow! Boston! What’s it like there, and when you coming back?” Tommy said as he peered at his fishing bobber, thinking he saw a nibble.

“I may not be coming back, son.”

Tommy’s head turned sharply toward Jacob, as his hazel eyes began to fill like little pools. Jacob knew he rarely returned to past marinas so he had no idea what to say, feeling like his lies to the young boy were beyond their quota. Their silence seemed endless before either spoke.

Tommy’s tears spilled over his freckled cheeks as he tilted his head towards the water. “That’s what my mom said when she went to the hospital for the last time.”

His comment stung Jacob, as he finally realized how important these next few hours would be for the both of them.

“Let me get my pole, see if we can catch a few,” Jacob said as he jumped up and headed to his boat.

They didn’t catch one fish that afternoon, but it really didn’t matter - their conversation would last a lifetime.

With all his goodbyes said, and his open items in Maryland closed, Jacob maneuvered his yacht out of its slip and traveled through the Gunpowder River towards the Chesapeake Bay, taking one final look at the marina before it disappeared around the point. Getting started later than he had planned, nightfall was setting in as he looked for the rising full moon to help guide him in his southward journey.

Before entering the bay, he came upon a railroad drawbridge and jockeyed into position for its next opening. He reached for his satellite phone and punched in a number from his PDA, then prompted the

answerer to switch to encrypted mode.

“Hello. This is Trevor Demsky. I need to order a change of identification package in the name of Bryce Andrews. You have my current photo. Ship the material to Cherry Grove, South Carolina, post of office box...”

With the opening of the bridge, Jacob powered the boat through and his personal transition took place as he left behind everything about Jacob Cohen. His past, present, and future life was now Bryce Andrews, with no turning back.

He wondered how one man with so many identities could have no true identity at all?

Chapter 3

"I think its time we get this meeting underway," declared the engineering manager of Signitell, as the pertinent staff situated themselves around the large oblong table of the company conference room.

Located on Depot Road in Conway, South Carolina, Signitell was a fast growing company of slightly under one hundred people - rising with its peers within the intelligence industry. Recent market upswings in its sector not only gave the company a sizeable growth - almost seventy percent in the past year - but also provided added pressure for its human resources to keep up the pace. With only a few dark tinted windows scattered about its gray brick exterior, the building gave little clues to its product line, and how the company interacted with security customers from around the world.

"The subject of the meeting is the preliminary design review of our new personal communication system known as Jugular. Our Israeli customer will be on-site at the end of next month for final testing and approval. Before we touch on the design, I'd like to begin with the current budget analysis," the engineering manager finished.

With that said, the program manager for the project began his presentation of the less than exciting financial information. Melanie Peterson, the responsible design engineer for Jugular, hated dealing with costs, estimates to complete, and all the rest of the data important to the accountants, or bean counters as she called them. She loved the design aspects of her job, being able to see her thoughts unfold into a real product within months, if not weeks. While accounting work added too many limits to both her process and

progress, she realized that without such considerations, no company would have any need for her if she could not produce a product at a profit to them. In a perfect engineering world though, there would be only one mission; to build the best product possible with no restrictions, and no one to answer to other than the customer and the high standards you set within yourself. A perfect world it was not, as she was sure the proverbial shit would hit the fan when she dropped the bombshell she was sitting on.

“... and with automated testing in mind, we will be coming in slightly under budget according ...” the program manager rambled on.

With a brief survey of the conference room, Melanie realized most of the attendees were lost in thoughts other than the current subject. Out of the eight professionals present, only the engineering manager and vice president seemed interested in the money talk. For the most part, these folks hated meetings with a passion because they represented downtime - time everyone could not afford with the outrageous work schedules they currently had. The one individual who seemed to beam through it all was the cocky young salesman by the name of Jim Dresher, who was responsible for reeling in Jugular. In these economic times, sales seemed to just fall into his lap, as evidenced by the new high-end Mercedes he recently acquired. Melanie despised him in every way. Basically a failure in the engineering realm, his next choice for work was sales, a choice that would allow him to reinforce his mighty ego on a daily basis. As the program manager finished his portion of the presentation, Melanie looked forward to aiming her bad news in Dresher’s direction, especially considering he was the root cause of the problem. She knew blame was his game, and he wasn’t going to win the battle this time.

“With the financials said and done, I’d like to ask Melanie to review the status of the current engineering design effort,” said the engineering manager.

“Certainly.” Melanie began as she passed out a stack of engineering drawings to each attendee.

“At this time, all Jugular system schematics have been drawn, checked, and released to documentation control. I have generated the overall product layout, but I’ve been unable to finalize this item and begin the drawings of all the metal that will make up the final assembly.”

Jim Dresher gave a quick glance at the vice president before interrupting with his attack.

“You mean to tell me we don’t have the metal on order for Jugular? Do you realize we’re looking at a three-week lead-time to get those pieces manufactured and in house? That leaves us less than one week to assemble the unit and test it before the customer comes in. What’s the hold up?”

“I understand the schedule, Jim. Considering you based Jugular on one of our existing products, you under estimated this project from the start. The showstopper lies in the fact that we’ve never designed a portable transmitter this lightweight with a battery that would provide operation for a thirty-six hour period. After I exhausted my search for such a battery, I notified you two weeks ago and requested we increase the unit weight to accommodate our existing electrical design. You rejected my request, stating that you had already committed this weight to the customer in order to get the contract. I then informed you that we would need to redesign the electrical portion of Jugular to run at a lower power requirement in order to utilize a smaller battery, adding a possible delay in our schedule. You

agreed to the additional design effort - a cost that we would have to eat. It's unfortunate that you forgot our exchange, but I have our email correspondence documented," Melanie expressed in a confidant yet monotone voice as she held up several pages in her hand. Dresher began to reach for them, but Melanie turned and forwarded the copies of their emails to the vice president.

A dead silence spread through the room as all eyes turned towards the gray haired gentleman seated at the power position of the conference table. Being almost a father figure to the group, he never had to raise the volume of his quiet nature to command respect. It was always present. Waiting for his reply, everyone knew weight was the most critically aspect of this particular product, as it would be carried in the battlefield by a soldier who was already overloaded with gear.

"Jim. You mean to tell me we're going to be late in giving this customer his product because you didn't take the time to consult with engineering before committing to this ridiculously low weight? What we're you thinking?"

"I think its called commission sir," Melanie said as she turned to Dresher with a smile that almost choked him, noting how his boyish hairstyle suited him well at this particular moment in time.

Turning her attention back to the vice president, Melanie began, "I may be able to meet the schedule if I ask our metal fabricator for a one week delivery on our parts as opposed to three, but it's going to cost us".

"Go for it. Dresher's commission will eat some of the cost. We're not going to get a bad name for ourselves in being late on deliveries. It's the death of a company in our field no matter how good we are," the vice president said as he stared at Dresher, whose cheeks were

noticeably red as he slouched in his chair.

After the fireworks had ended, the rest of the meeting was quite uneventful for the most part. Quality specification issues were addressed and environmental requirements rounded out the discussion. As everyone dispersed, Melanie was sure to direct one last comment at Dresher during his hasty departure.

“No hard feelings, Jim. Just remember, it’s a dog eat dog world in here, and we’re all wearing milk bone underwear.”

Needless to say, Dresher had no reply as he swiftly turned the corner towards his office, tucking his tail between his legs and running for cover.

“Well now. With half of Friday afternoon shot, I still have to generate status reports on the other four projects I’m working on before I can begin the weekend. What ever happened to TGIF?” Melanie thought to herself as she gathered her documentation and began her trek towards her office. She started down a hallway she knew as motivational lane. The company had placed numerous positive psychology posters on its beige walls to boost its employee’s morale during these hectic times. Each reflected a different theme, such as leadership, perseverance, passion, and excellence, with related graphics and wording for emphasis. She chuckled as she recalled how she joked with her company friend and confidante, Nancy Myers, that one poster was missing. Entitled “Teamwork”, it would depict two female employees working together to remove a male stripper’s g-string. “Human resources would have a field day with that one,” she thought.

Just shy of making a left turn into the engineering office area, the assembly floor manager encountered her with an electrical component in his forwarded hand, looking rather distraught.

“Mel, I’ve been looking for you for the past half hour. This power supply doesn’t fit in the Aspen assembly and we’re trying to prep the unit for final test this weekend, then shipment on Monday morning. Would you mind taking a look?” he said.

“Certainly Doug. I’ve been tied up in a meeting,” she said with a positive voice. While dreading the thought of getting involved in putting out a production “fire” with so much left to do in her week’s end, she realized this particular job was her responsibility as well.

Following in his footsteps to the end of the hall, they soon walked into the vast open area of the building known as Assembly, with its high ceilings and rows upon rows of industrial style workbenches, each seating an individual who was involved in the assembly of the company’s product line. Soldering irons, toolboxes, and electrostatic protection equipment lined the tabletops. Their walk ended at the bench where the Aspen unit was in its final stages of being built, a system that was to be used in the discrete tracking of motor vehicles. Melanie placed the power supply in its intended position and immediately noted its mounting holes did not line up with the holes of the bracket which was meant to secure it. A quick check of the part numbers verified they were the correct items for this particular assembly.

“Doug, it looks like I made a mistake in the bracket drawing. Please remove the bracket and take it to our machine shop technician. I’ll revise the drawing and forward it to him to complete the modification. We’ll need to slot the existing mounting holes to accept the power supply.”

“Will do Mel. I appreciate it,” the assembly floor manager said.

“I wish they were all that easy,” she thought as she turned towards the engineering office area before being interrupted by a call from a

member of the quality inspection team.

A short walk to the inspection area brought her to another new product she was closely involved with.

“We’re shipping the Oasis job today and I need your signature on a couple last minute engineering changes that were made, Melanie,” said the inspector, dressed in a purple lab coat that matched the rest of her team.

“No problem at all,” Melanie replied as she grabbed a red pen and began signing her life away.

“That should do it. Thanks Melanie,” said the inspector as she closed the assembly instruction book and began collecting cleaning liquids for the final preparation of Oasis.

A fast turn and a double stepped pace moved her in the direction of her office, almost praying that no one else needed her immediate attention. Located near the center of the building, the engineering area was void of any windows. While it was slightly illuminated by a few overhead lights, it obtained most of its lighting from lamps on each individual’s desk. The engineers liked it dark, avoiding any glare on their computer monitors. Others in the company referred to their part of the building as the “mushroom factory”. Being one large room that was subdivided by large gray cubicles, it was home to almost sixteen individuals for eight plus hours a day, which included weekends on an increasing basis. The pace of work could only be described as intense.

As Melanie entered her office and eased into her chair, she felt relieved to see no sticky notes plastered to her computer screen requesting her urgent assistance. She reached for her cold cup of coffee and enjoyed a slow sip, thinking how only one cup in past mornings has grown into multiple cups throughout the day. She was

tired, and the solitude of no one being in her immediate area was a very welcomed feeling. Looking over her cluttered desk, Melanie wasn't quite sure if she should take the time to organize the stacks of papers that resided on its surface, or if it would be easier to light a match and get it over with. She worked in layers, and usually could not find anything after cleaning up. The only two areas void of engineering documentation was her computer keyboard, and the back part of a reference table that contained her photographic tribute to her family.

Setting her mug in its place, Melanie's mind drifted as her eyes gazed on a burgundy framed image of her one and only child. Actually no longer a child, Collin was now twenty-two years of age and enjoying his summer after completing his third year at Coastal Carolina University, majoring in computer science. As she focused on his light brown hair, she reminisced about the little boy she watched grow up on the beach, and how his blonde hair at that age was almost as white as snow during the summer months. Getting into a great deal of trouble as an adolescent, he was now the rock of her very existence, considering she was currently separated from her husband of twenty four of her forty six years, Alex Peterson.

Melanie's photo of Alex still claimed the portion of her table that it always had, furthest away from her view, and a little dustier than it had ever been. Taken just over a year ago, it provided an accurate portrayal of his forty eight year old appearance today - small wire framed glasses adorned a strong, chiseled face, backed by a full head of thick peppered gray hair, complimented by small, dark sideburns. Being six foot four in height, Alex's stature presented a confidant look, while his personality reflected a humble man who was sure to never walk on anyone's toes. Melanie never fell out of love with those traits.

Being separated for eight months to the day, Melanie's mind struggled on a daily basis with her decision to initiate their move in opposite directions. Working at Signitell as well, Alex was the vice president of sales, a position that brought him into contact with a wide range of individuals. Rumors had begun nine months prior regarding Alex's involvement with a female representative of the United States Navy. Starting out as a customer relationship, Alex seemed to be spending more and more time with the woman who was both ten years his junior, and had the physical attributes to be a prize worthy of capture to any of his peers. Melanie's repeated scrutiny of Alex prompted his statement that he was only swooning his client for further business, with no personal relationship existing between them. That was voided when a family friend reported seeing the two share a kiss at an area bar. The matter finally moved to the breaking point for Melanie, believing that when you begin a relationship, you fully trust your significant other - when that trust is knocked down, it never comes back. Her disbelief of Alex, her growing distaste for the sales department, and her slight curiosity of a fresh start made her decision final in asking him to leave their house which was once a very happy home.

"Hey girlfriend!" Nancy Meyers said as she peeked around the edge of the cubicle. "Ah, ah, ah. You better not be thinking about who I think you're thinking about," pointing to Alex's picture.

Melanie's downward frown gave away her guilt for only a second before its upward change displayed her relief to see Nancy. Their friendship had spanned more than four years at Signitell, supporting each other through the downs and riding high on each other's ups. Being optimistic when it came to life in general, and pessimistic only when the topic moved to the males of our species, Nancy's smile was

an ever-present symbol of positivity to Melanie. It seemed to fit her oblong face well, and took the attention off her well-rounded nose. Their primary difference was in body styles, as Melanie was tall and lean, while Nancy was much shorter and had somewhat of a couch potato figure. Her short gray hair gave backing to her numerous years as a senior purchasing agent within the electronics industry.

“Just taking a well deserved mental break, Nancy. It’s good to see you,” Melanie replied.

“How about we get the mind on something other than mister ”sell me your product, and I’ll sell you mine,“ Nancy said as she raised the right corner of her mouth and pointed her finger to Melanie like a pistol. While it was a poor impersonation of Alex, it made its point in every way.

Still feeling the sting of her own divorce, Nancy was more than happy to offer advice on the topic to anyone who was willing to listen, and ready to listen to anyone who was willing to talk. Happily married for fifteen years, but only missing the chance of being a mom due to forces beyond her control, she and her now ex-husband, Dale, shared a life together that seemed to be blessed from day one. Their relationship began a slow decline three years ago, and ended in an avalanche when her ex ran into an old college friend, who in turn ran Dale into cocaine. With a personality that went from hot to cold quicker than the turn of a faucet due to his increased experimentation in the illegal substance market, Nancy gave him an ultimatum to choose either her or his newfound hobby, but not both. Unfortunately, she picked the wrong side of his personality to bargain with; a tragedy that nearly placed her in a coma due to his drug induced rage. After recovering, she never looked back.

”Just wanted to stop by and congratulate you on letting a little air

out of Mr. Dresher's ego and starting his weekend off on a good note."

"Boy, word really travels fast around here," Melanie said.

"Sometimes too fast. Speaking of weekends, what's going on?"

"Not much really. I'm definitely not coming in here this weekend. Probably going to get my beach runs in. Collin managed to get the Sea-Doo running again, so I may take a trip up to the Intercoastal Inlet. I need the stress relief. We'll see. How about you?"

"Visiting my sister and her family on Saturday afternoon. I haven't seen my nieces for a while, Rebecca and Sara. Sunday will probably be a catch-up-around-the-house day," Nancy replied as she looked at her watch. "Oops. Gotta go Mel. I have to wrap up a blanket order of mil-spec connectors so we can hit our July shortage target. Give me a call if you want to get out Saturday night," she said as she turned out of view.

"If only I had her energy. Maybe these sixty hour weeks are not what they're cracked up to be," Melanie thought to herself as she turned her attention to her computer screen.

Two hours of keystrokes got her roughly to the midpoint of her status report tasks when she felt like her eyes were ready to pop out of their sockets. Melanie sensed the calm of the engineering area as most folks had already departed, getting the much-needed weekend underway. As she sat back in her less than comfortable, but highly economical chair - much like all the other furniture in the place - she could feel the presence of someone standing outside her office. A very familiar scent passed her by her nose as she immediately recognized it to be the favorite cologne of her estranged husband. She slowly turned around, as if to examine engineering drawings posted on her cubicle walls, never turning completely in his direction.

"Hi Mel," Alex said in a very low-key voice.

”Alex. What can I do for you?“

Melanie was always sure to keep their conversations in a totally professional state while at work. She could sometimes feel her gut clench as she passed Alex in the hall, never allowing her eyes to meet his under any circumstances unless absolutely necessary. The whole situation was just too fresh at this point in time. Nancy often joked that you don’t get your meat where you get your bread and butter, vowing to never date anyone at work, and Melanie felt every ounce of her statement at this moment in time.

”I just wanted to apologize for my employee’s behavior regarding the Jugular delay. Dresher had no justification for addressing blame in the design review today on anyone other than himself,“ Alex replied as he stepped into her office and glanced towards their family photos.

”No apology is necessary. His age and ambition will eventually give way to business ethics. It takes time. Is there anything else I can do for you?“ Melanie said in a very firm, unchanging voice while directing her eyes towards her calendar.

Alex could feel her turmoil in the air from his very presence, as he turned and sat partially on her reference table. His mind raced as he physically looked at his feet, but mentally looked for the slightest opening to her heart. As he struggled with his guilt from the past, he never wanted the current situation, but knew patience was the only way for Melanie to solve her personal puzzle, a solution he hoped would be in his favor. He slowly brought his stance to more of an at ease status before continuing the conversation.

”Mel. I wish we could ease the tension between us, especially at work. I know we have water under the bridge, but can’t we try to make the best of today,“ he pleaded.

A gamete of emotions ran through Melanie, as this was the first

personal conversation they shared since Alex initially moved into a friend's house, and then into a leased oceanfront condo near there home in North Myrtle Beach. While his words brought back some positive feelings of the past, they were quickly squashed with mistrust and blame. Shaking inside, Melanie was not ready for this but she knew she had to present a strong facade to survive.

"Alex, I think we need to focus on our jobs right now. While you look at our interactions as being tense, I think we need to maintain somewhat of a wall between us to preserve our professionalism here, and I need you to respect that. It's bad enough that everyone in this place knows our business. I don't want to add any more fuel to the fire," she replied as she could feel the tears building in the corners of her eyes.

"I can respect that."

"Thank you. Now if you don't mind, I have to catch up on some paperwork."

Alex let out a long drawn breathe and turned to exit. As he broke the boundary of her vision in passing by the edge of her doorway, a tear from Melanie's eye broke its boundary as well and fell to her lap. If only it could somehow be easier she thought. While both loved working at Signitell, neither wanted to leave in order to extinguish the personal hell that they shared.

"I need your help with Aspen again, Melanie," the assembly floor manager spouted around her doorway, as her swollen eyes presented him with the fact that he had just caught her in a very bad moment. "I'm sorry. I'll stop by later."

"That's ok, Doug. Give me just a minute and I'll meet you at the workbench."

It would be quarter past nine before Melanie was able to leave for

home that Friday evening. As she made her way back to Cherry Grove in North Myrtle Beach, her head reeled with the day's events, as she almost felt drunk from sheer exhaustion. She passed by a location on Route Seventeen that on a daily basis, during every commute to and from work, offered hope in removing her from her hectic stage of life. It was a shop that was being offered for lease - a location that she knew would present the best opportunity for a coffee house to catch locals as they too made their daily drive to and from Conway. While it was only a pipe dream, it was all Melanie needed for now.

Overlooking the last rays of sunshine as they glimmered across the San Francisco Bay, a middle-aged gentleman by the name of Frank Espozito enjoyed a martini while seated at a table that was reserved for him every Friday evening at the Mikayla Restaurant. Nestled on a hillside in the scenic town of Sausalito, the panoramic windows of the formal dining area offered breathtaking views of Sausalito Yacht Harbor, Angel Island, and the peninsula of Tiburon. Mikayla was his wife's first choice for evening dinners until she was tragically taken from him last year in a head on collision in an area just south of the Golden Gate Bridge. While deeply saddened by her loss, his troubles extended far beyond her memory during this particular visit.

Pushing aside his barely touched plate of linguini with prawns, Frank finished his drink as alcohol had become his choice of caloric intake. His thoughts lulled back into the burden of finances, and no small burden they were considering they almost meant his untimely death. Clients who wanted no dealings whatsoever with the Internal Revenue Service were his specialty. In a business where he was

responsible for millions of illegal dollars, Frank needed to know where those illegal dollars were at all times; however; one specific company had removed that knowledge from him for a short period of time. He wanted revenge.

A young man dressed in a beige summer suit casually made his way to Frank's table, noticing his empty stare towards the harbor activities.

"Good evening, Mr. Espozito."

"Ah. Carlo. Have a seat," Frank replied as his eyes came back to life. "I hope you have good news for me, son. Yes?"

Carlo assumed a seat close to Frank, and then motioned the waiter to order a glass of wine.

"I do, sir. I do."

With his close cut highlighted hair, neatly cropped goatee, and black-framed glasses, it could easily be said that Carlo was accustomed to both style and money. Being Frank's personal assistant, he knew Frank better than Frank knew himself. In the line of business they shared, their only trust was found in each other.

Carlo wet his lips with the glass of Pinot Noir before delivering his message in a hushed voice. "I received word late this afternoon that the contract has been accepted at offering price. The sweeper has been dispatched to South Carolina to clean up the mess."

"Is this guy capable of sweeping these bastards on site? I want a statement made here Carlo. Those sons of bitches at Recov made me age ten years in the past three months! I want that company to look like hell had ascended to earth when he gets done god damn it! Is he capable of doing that?" Frank replied, fighting every breath to keep his voice down.

Carlo surveyed his surroundings to make sure his boss's anger

had not drawn anyone's attention before continuing. "Easy. I've been assured this guy is the best, Frank. Bottom line, there is no other in his class."

Chapter 4

Lake effect rain showers pummeled the northwestern New York town of Dunkirk, as it extended dreary weather into its fifth consecutive day.

As Daniel Carlington opened his eyes to the world Saturday morning, his blurred vision slowly focused on the dim light outside as it tried to break the bounds of the closed blinds that isolated his bedroom. Hearing no sounds of life from the other tenants that surrounded his second floor apartment, his attention moved to his alarm clock which confirmed his suspicions that it was too early to rise, especially considering he was at the bar until closing a few hours prior. A potent mixture of lemon drop shooters chased with beer was still having an affect on his equilibrium, even as he lay perfectly still. He needed to sleep off his current state.

Rolling his stocky frame over to achieve a more comfortable position, he tried to shut down his mind and concentrate on absolutely nothing. It worked for only a few brief seconds before his thoughts started out as a slow jog, and then raced through his brain. Only one subject surfaced, but it was a subject that brought his body far out of its relaxed state - his ex-fiancé Jill.

Daniel and Jill were engaged to be married later that year, but she called the relationship off about a month ago. It seemed Daniel's bouts with depression and binge drinking had finally taken its toll on a once solid bond, and she was now firmly committed to keeping him out of her future. For Daniel, Jill offered so many ups to his life - a life that was littered with downs ever since he witnessed the murder of his father twelve years ago at the age of fourteen.

As he turned again, Daniel's eyes rested on a picture frame situated on the front of his dresser. Behind its broken pane of glass sat a photograph of he and Jill during much happier times at a picnic held in the early Spring. Their smiles seemed to be a lifetime ago, as his thoughts turned to how she hurled the picture frame at him right before he saw her for the last time. Daniel knew there was no second chance this time, considering he had almost a dozen before.

"I need to get back to sleep!" he screamed as he twisted away from the image.

Sleep and alcohol increasingly became his answer to his troubled life. While he knew liquor helped him forget everything in the evening, it only amplified his thoughts of despair in the morning, a time when he cared the least to be conscious. The thought of breaking this never-ending cycle was in the back of his mind, with the foremost being thankful that he didn't have to report to work today, certain that he would have been late once again - a problem that kept him looking for new employment on a regular basis.

Focusing on the ceiling, Daniel could feel his body become extremely heavy as his thoughts of an empty future and his building depression robbed him of his energy. As he often wondered what method of suicide would be his easiest way out, this time he fantasized about hooking a hose to the tail pipe of his car and fishing it through the window with the engine running. He pictured himself in the driver's seat and began to relax as he could almost feel the deadly potion of carbon monoxide entering his lungs. As his body went into a tranquil state, his fantasy finally emptied his mind and he came to where he wanted to be. Fast asleep, he was in a place where he felt no pain - but his dreams would have other plans...

... Standing atop a gray steel platform, Daniel looked around to see

fog to all sides of him, with endless blackness above. Peering over the edge, he could only see about five feet down, as the haze blocked the origin of the structure that provided his footing. The grayness started to clear, as he heard a much familiar voice from the past.

“Dan. How are you making out up there son? We have to get these inventory racks built before third shift gets in,” his father said.

“Dad? Is that you?” Daniel replied with his heart in his throat.

“Of course. Let’s get a move on so we can get home. This is the last rack.”

As the fog continued to dissipate, Daniel could make out a figure standing on a concrete floor about twenty feet down. Halfway between five and six feet tall, with a stocky build and close cropped brown hair, Daniel recognized his father, who’s looks resembled Daniel’s as a man today. It was their last day together, as he was helping his father finish the stock room addition of his family’s warehouse.

“I’ll be right down Dad. I want to talk to you!” Daniel yelled.

Immediately at the end of Daniel’s last word, a scream, then the echo of a gunshot came from the office area, followed by the sound of a body as it thudded against a wall.

“Stay put son. Let me see what’s going on,” his father said.

“No Dad! Don’t go! He’s gonna kill you!” Daniel tried to scream, but the sound was no louder than a mumble.

Daniel attempted to begin his climb down when he noticed his feet were planted firmly in place and the structure under him had disappeared, leaving him no possibility of helping his father. He watched in vain as his father rounded the corner of the massive inventory isle and was confronted by a dark figure, with no discernable features, holding a long handgun that was pointed directly at his father’s chest. Daniel tried to scream again, but it was as if his

vocal chords had been completely removed. Not a sound came from within his body.

The dark figure slowly raised his handgun and pointed it directly at his father's head. "Every man has a journey through life. Some journeys are just cut shorter than others", the figure said, as he squeezed the trigger. His voiced permanently etched Daniel's brain.

All actions beyond that point went into slow motion. Daniel could see the bullet exit the barrel and inch towards his father's right eye. It slowly entered its mark, and then exited through the back of his skull, causing an explosion of blood that shimmered in the dim light. As his father's body began its slow fall backwards, everything around Daniel turned bright white.

He sat up in his bed totally drenched with sweat. "No, Dad, no!" he screamed louder than he had ever screamed before.

Eight hundred miles south of Dunkirk, Saturday morning's story was quite the opposite in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

Melanie Peterson was on the final leg of her seven-mile beach run at quarter to eight as she circled back into her hometown of Cherry Grove. With the sunrise and the Atlantic Ocean to her right, and the vast array of condominiums to her left, she headed north as the salty breeze pushed past her face. Running was her outlet - her personal release from all the stress life had to offer, and she was in the peak of her mindset at this point in time. Mental clarity entered from all sides as she concentrated on her breathing and occasionally focused on the shuffle of her feet.

Low tide offered a great amount of additional beach space, considering the ocean's edge started approximately one hundred yards out from its high tide mark on the sandy real estate. Three

wheeled sand bikes whizzed by her, some with small trailers attached that carried very young children, as the driver of each sat in a recumbent position. The beach in front of the condos slowly brought tourists to its flat surface - some sipped cups of freshly brewed coffee as they admired the sunrise, while others began assembling their tents and umbrellas in preparation for a day that was sure to make them long for its memory after their vacation was over, as they sat behind their desks back at their place of employment.

Melanie passed under the Cherry Grove fishing pier and came upon a group of beachgoers that were assembled at the shoreline, with all looking down in a circular formation. A jeep utilized by the lifeguard patrol slowly pulled up to investigate. Her curiosity got the best of her as Melanie slowed her pace and stopped just outside the group. As a small void in the assembly appeared, Melanie peeked in to see what was drawing all the attention. It was a large sea turtle that was hit by the propeller of a passing boat, evidenced by a set of fatal gashes that carved the top of its shell.

Continuing her journey, it took Melanie a minute or two to resume her pace and block out the burning fatigue she felt in her thighs. She admired the lifeguards‘ daily routine in eyeing up the line they established to locate their numerous rental umbrellas, carefully calculated to be just beyond high tide when it arrived, but close enough so their renters had a minimal walk to low tide’s edge. She came upon the landmark that signaled her to turn off the sand towards home, a rock jetty that started at the beach’s midpoint and disappeared into the Atlantic.

As Melanie passed between two massive condominium complexes, she welcomed the ten degree temperature drop the shade had to offer as July’s morning sun had already warmed the area up to

eighty-two degrees. It was going to be a hot one. She crossed the two lane main road, and then entered an area that was made up of numerous multi-story homes, with their foundations beginning ten feet beyond ground level as they were mounted on large pilings. Each offered parking under its structure. Coming to the dead end of forty-ninth avenue north, where the bay snuck up on the development, she greeted the site of her home.

With a click of her watch, she stopped the timer and gazed into its display. Melanie noted the time was slower than normal, but she felt very good physically as she walked circles in the street during cool down mode and admired her home. Its festive exterior of light pink paint highlighted with white stairs, white trim work, and numerous white balconies always brought a smile to her face, as she thought of being in Curacao. After she arrived home from her vacation there three years ago, she immediately began work on her plans to remodel the exterior to match the coloring of Curacao's architecture. While it presented a strong appearance at first, she noticed more and more homes duplicated her style as their beach community slowly brightened. She never considered herself to be a trendsetter.

Up two sets of stairs and through the front door, Melanie stopped in her tracks as the smell of freshly cooked sausage hit her nose. The irresistible aroma lead her through the open floor plan of the living room and into the kitchen to find her son Collin just sitting down to breakfast.

"Good morning, Mom. There's plenty left on the stove. I browned the pancakes a little too much but I hope they'll do."

"Thank you Collin, especially from the stomach. Any plans for today?"

"Kimberley is coming over shortly. She's never been to Murrell's

Inlet so I think we'll head south and do some exploring," Collin said with a mouth stuffed with scrambled eggs.

"That sounds like fun. The sun's pretty strong today so make sure you take plenty of sun block. Do you think the Sea-Doo is running well enough for a trip to the Intracoastal Inlet?" she said after a gulp of orange juice.

"Sure. It only needed a tune-up. Just check the gas tank before you go. I'm not sure if the gauge is working."

"Great. I need to get out of these sweaty clothes and I'll grab a bite."

Back through the living room, then up the open stairs, Melanie stopped at the top for one more whiff of breakfast before changing. She couldn't wait to get out of her soaked running bra and into something dry. As she came downstairs, a knock at the front door caught her attention. She stopped to let Collin's girlfriend Kimberley in.

"Good morning, Kimberley. I hear you're heading to see Murrell's Inlet today."

"Hi Melanie. Before you know it, Collin will make a Myrtle Beach local out of me yet. It's great to finally have a Saturday off from the hospital."

Melanie admired not only Kimberley's smile, but her overall character as well. Being a native Pennsylvanian, Kimberley was raised in a blue collar family who instilled strong work ethics into her being. Her dad worked all of his life at a Pennsylvania steel mill before his job finally succumbed to foreign competition, leaving him wondering how to support his family, with no chance of offering Kimberley financial support for college. Scholarships, part time work, and student loans kept her going as she worked her way through the

University of Maryland nursing program, receiving her bachelor's degree and taking the necessary tests to assume the title of registered nurse. After graduation, she came to Myrtle Beach with her girlfriends on vacation. When it was time to return home, she was the only one out of the five who decided to stay in the area, working odd jobs until a position opened at the Myrtle Beach Emergency Medical Center. She and Collin met a little over a year ago through a mutual friend during a Summer hiking trip in North Carolina and have been an item ever since. Kimberley's maturity was at a level or two beyond her son's, and Melanie felt like she offered a great sense of rationality to Collin during a time in his life when his youth sometimes outweighed his ability to make a sound decision.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't get lost," Kimberley said in a quick whisper as they both watched Collin fumble while packing lunch in an insulated back pack.

"I'm sure you will," Melanie said, as she recalled how Kimberly always talked in a fast paced, confident voice.

Melanie watched them as they walked down the front stairs towards Collin's jeep, noting how his companion's blonde hair bounced past her shoulders. She always wore it in a straight fashion, parted in the middle. Melanie desired that simplistic look for her own blonde locks, but she just couldn't shake the curling iron as she was a slave to volume.

"I have to get some food in my stomach," Melanie said as she closed the front door and headed for the kitchen.

After she filled her dish with the morning blend, Melanie sat at the kitchen table and began her meal for a party of one. She paused for a second and noted the unusual amount of quiet her home had to offer at that particular moment. It was almost too quiet, as its empty feeling

seemed to administer a slight sting to her inner soul. Not even the abundant amount of beach decor presented the warm feeling that it always had.

“I have got to get outside.”

After a hasty finish of her breakfast, she ran upstairs, donned a one piece bathing suit, pulled her hair back in a ponytail, and grabbed her travel bag. She made her way to the elaborate, multi-leveled deck that adorned the back of her home. The ten o’clock morning sun was making its way high in the sky as it provided so much lucidity to her surroundings. Melanie found that the physical warmth helped to replace the mental warmth that she was lacking a short while ago.

As she walked down the two flights of white stairs to the lower level of the deck, a portion of the structure that came to rest on the bay, Melanie surveyed the scene and the serenity it offered. Not many people were out and about as the piers and waterways seemed fairly empty. It was a sight she saw on an increasing basis due to the fact that area homeowners were being robbed of their precious bay by Mother Nature. The Atlantic continued to push sand and sentiment in from the northeast, causing the channels to get shallower and shallower. While it was high tide, and high tide meant she could make it out to the ocean on her personal watercraft with no problem, some piers actually had no water encompassing them during low tide, causing homeowners to move their boats elsewhere. Several of her long time neighbors had already sold their homes and moved away. While Melanie was unsure of the future of her bay-front property, she realized the present was more important as the Sea-Doo provided instant stress relief from her hectic work week.

Melanie lowered the small watercraft into the bay from its resting position above deck, watching its red and white exterior reflect upon

the water's surface. It offered her quick access to the area's many water oriented attractions, and she really missed its use during the few weeks it was not running. Her current occupation made her appreciate mechanical gear when it operated the way it was suppose to, especially thanks to Collin's touch when he had the time to invest in repairs.

After getting situated on the Sea-Doo, Melanie placed her sunglasses on, zipped up her life vest, then listened to the engine sputter to life on her first try of the electronic ignition. Its nimble design brought her away from the pier before she opened the throttle to bring her into the center of the bay. Circles and figure eights stepped her heart rate up a notch while the salt spray on her face was a welcomed companion to her trip.

With a little bit of watery fun out of the way, Melanie straightened the craft's direction as she headed for the mouth of the bay, with her next destination being the Atlantic Ocean. Cruising northeast, Cherry Grove flanked her right side, while the tall marsh grasses of the uninhabited inlands flanked her left. She was sure to stay within the only channel that was deep enough to complete that leg of the trip.

A gradual right turn to the east, and then southeast brought her towards the bay's opening. She could see the ocean's white caps in the distance as she reduced her speed, coming up on an area that was populated by tourists enjoying the area's beach and water amenities. One gentleman was propped up in his beach chair with a beer in one hand, a kite spool in another, and his attention directed toward the newspaper resting in his lap. A kite hovered two hundred yards beyond him. Further up on the ocean's point to the right, families lined the water's edge, as young children tested the surf for the first time and older ones road their boogie boards and skim

boards. The point to the left continued its uninhabited appearance as its edge darted east-northeastward up the coast, Melanie's intended direction.

She moved out into the Atlantic Ocean, apprehensive as always until she became accustomed to the frequency of its larger waves. Turning left to follow the coastline towards the Intracoastal Inlet between South and North Carolina, Melanie felt totally alone, as no one shared the ocean in her immediate vicinity. A feeling of a good nature, she enjoyed the hum of the Sea-Doo's engine and the repetitive motion as her body became one with her watercraft's ups and downs. She estimated a fifteen minute ride before she would make it to the inlet.

Ten minutes into the journey, the engine began to sputter. Melanie checked the gauges, but all seemed to be reporting a stable condition as the Sea-Doo seemed to correct its rough ride for another minute or two. Suddenly, one last sputter killed its operation. Repeated tries of the ignition turned up no positive results. Collin's comment regarding the malfunctioning gas gauge jolted her mind as she focused on its reading. Three quarters of a tank was displayed, but what amount was really onboard? Several hits of her fist caused the needle to move to its true position, resting below the empty mark.

Shifting her mind from the dead craft, she reviewed her surroundings. About two hundred yards offshore, she had little chance of swimming in with the Sea-Doo. She reached into her under-seat storage compartment for her travel bag, but a search for her cell phone came up empty.

"This is not good."

Melanie sat back on the seat and looked in the direction of her intended destination. She could see the Intracoastal Inlet ahead, just

slightly off to the left. Porpoises startled her as their school broke the water's surface nearby. Knowing that she was in the travel lanes of the shrimping fleet, her one hope was that she could flag down a boat as it came out of the inlet. Looking to the right further up the coast, her only sighting of humanity was a larger vessel off in the distance. Melanie was unsure of its direction. As bad as her dilemma seemed, she found solitude in her current situation as she took in the peacefulness her setting had to offer.

"I might float out to sea, but at least I'm not at work," she sighed.

Twenty minutes had passed before she realized the boat slightly to her right was heading towards the inlet. Approximately two hundred and fifty yards away, she stood up and began waving her bright yellow life vest above her head. Melanie had no idea if she would stand out enough against her vast backdrop for the boat's crew to see her. It was her only hope at the moment.

After a minute or two of signaling, she got the feeling the boat was turning towards her direction, but she was unsure if they saw her or the captain was correcting his course due to shallow areas. She looked toward the beach to her left and noted that her distance from it was increasing, as high tide was retreating and producing a strong under tow.

"Come on. You have to see me. I don't want to end up off the coast of Africa," she mumbled.

A sense of calm abruptly came into Melanie's being as the boat's course continued towards her and she was positive her situation would end shortly. Closing in on her position, she could view the navy blue sides of the yacht, while the sun reflected from its darkly tinted windows. It was quite an impressive site she thought as she sat on the Sea-Doo and breathed a deep breathe. She hated counting on

anyone, but this was one matter where pride completely exited her body.

As the yacht reached her position, she heard the captain throw the engines into neutral. She admired the vessel's presentation, as she realized it was fairly new due to its design and overall cleanliness.

"If you have to get rescued, you might as well do it first class, Mel," she mumbled to herself, while waiting for someone to come forward. She didn't wait very long.

"Need some help?" a tall, dark haired gentleman offered as he came into her view on the ship's aft deck.

"I sure do. I'm out of gas."

"Did you ever hear of a gas gauge?" the man said with a slight chuckle, presenting a rope to throw to her.

"Nah. They're highly overrated," Melanie replied as she caught the rope on the first try and tied it to the Sea-Doo's chassis.

The gentleman slowly pulled Melanie and her craft to the rear of the yacht. Located on its stern, a small wooden deck lowered into the water as the gentleman guided the Sea-Doo over it. He then raised it several feet above the water and offered Melanie a welcoming hand to board the aft deck. After a quick tie-down of her craft, he turned his smile toward her direction.

"I'm heading to the Intracoastal Inlet. I can drop you off at the nearest refueling station," he said.

"That would be great. Thanks for stopping," Melanie replied as she straightened her hair back into its pony tail.

He walked up to the helm deck and situated himself in the white leather captain's chair. Melanie followed, taking a seat on the nearby copilot's chair. She was somewhat overwhelmed by the impressiveness of the deck, noting how the beautiful teak wood trim

contrasted with the bright white interior surfaces. She enjoyed the shade of the bridge after being exposed to the sun's midday rays. The gentleman shifted the engines into drive, while Melanie's eyes began browsing his being. His athletic build and tanned skin caught her attention, as his sense of confidence added to his overall presentation.

"By the way, I'm Melanie Peterson."

The gentleman continued his view across the front of the vessel during his reply. "It's a pleasure to meet you Melanie. I'm Bryce. Bryce Andrews."

He enjoyed testing the waters of his new identity.

"Well Bryce, are you a local?"

Bryce paused while studying the cockpit's instrument panel, paying close attention to the depth finder, then concentrating on not only his reply, but anticipating the entire conversation that would surely follow.

"No. I'm just sailing in from Boston. And you?"

"Born and raised here. Are you here on business, or pleasure?"

After leaning back in his chair, Bryce considered how important his unexpected visitor may be in regards to area information. She was not only worth the conversation, but her figure offered pleasure to the eye as well.

"A little bit of both. I'm a real estate investor."

"Ah. The only profession that seems to be making any kind of money these days," Melanie replied as she stood up to check the status of her Sea-Doo while they skimmed across turbulent water. "Any particular property type?"

"I'm meeting with several groups to discuss golf properties."

Melanie smiled. "You realize we already have over one hundred courses in the area now, don't you?"

“We don’t have your standard golf course in mind. These are super properties. Self-contained retirement communities. You actually don’t have to leave the confines unless you so desire. Grocery stores, shopping, fine dining, and even medical services are all in one place.”

In Melanie’s mind, she had already ranked him in the ladder of life, but his last comment bumped his status up a notch or two. She wondered if her conversation was bordering on flirting, a craft she was very rusty on. Either way, she felt refreshed by their exchange.

After a fifteen minute cruise, their trip came upon the mouth of the inlet. Bryce spotted a marina gas station and turned in its direction. Melanie was somewhat disheartened as she felt the journey went by too quick. She not only enjoyed the casual dialogue, but it wasn’t every day she got a ride aboard a yacht of this stature.

Bryce positioned the yacht at the end of the marina’s reach, just beyond the refueling area. He walked to the aft deck and lowered the Sea-Doo into Little River while Melanie repositioned her life vest. As he offered his left hand while she climbed aboard her watercraft, she noticed his ring finger was void of any bands, and her mind fought with releasing its prominent thought to her mouth for her next comment. Her mouth won out.

“Do you have a pen and paper?” she said in a somewhat unsteady voice.

“Certainly,” he replied as he went to the helm deck, then returned to hand her the requested items.

Melanie jotted down her home phone number. She creased the paper and offered it to his waiting hand.

“If you’re ever interested in seeing the area, feel free to give me a call. I’m a great tour guide.” she said, as she tilted her head and looked at him through the corners of her eyes.

“I’m sure you are,” he replied, then gave the Sea-Doo a shove off, displaying a charismatic smile.

During her refueling, Melanie watched as the yacht disappeared around the river’s bend, pondering whether or not they would share another conversation. He gave no clue to his future intentions, but for now, she felt a little more whole than in recent months.

Following a quick change in an area restroom, Melanie rounded out her day with shopping along the waterfront and a late lunch that actually turned out to be her dinner for the day. The trip back home in the early evening was less eventful than her trip out. “Thank goodness,” she thought.

She was greeted at home by a single message flashing on her answering machine. A push of the play button revealed her estranged husband’s voice and his excuse to drop off a back ordered kitchenware gadget that Melanie had placed with the wife of one of his associates quite some time ago. It was a call that would not be returned that weekend, as she felt this was a matter that could be resolved during the work week.

A hot shower revived her as she grabbed a light robe, a glass of red wine, and a novel to top-off her evening. For a brief moment, Melanie recalled Nancy’s request from work on Friday for a possible rendezvous on Saturday night. She looked at the phone, then turned back towards to her book and snuggled into her soft bed - the bar scene was the furthest thought from her mind, as Bryce seemed to be the nearest at this point in time.

Chapter 5

Monday morning brought light showers and distant thunder to the Myrtle Beach area ... weather that seemed synonymous to the trouble that entered its borders just two days prior.

Four miles inland from the Intracoastal Inlet, located along the Intracoastal Waterway in Little River South Carolina, the Myrtle Beach Yacht Club began another Summer's day. Being peak vacation season, the docks were at full capacity. While some of the boaters made the club their home year round, many utilized its transient welcome mat to park their vessel during their brief stay in the area. The environment offered a comfortable atmosphere to many unfamiliar faces, including faces who wished to remain anonymous.

Bryce walked across the center dock towards his yacht with numerous bags in hand. It had been a busy morning. A quick trip to the Cherry Grove post office turned up the identification package that was waiting for him, finalizing his transformation from Jacob Cohen to Bryce Andrews. After picking up his rental vehicle, a black Suburban, he completed his transaction for a cell phone to be used in the area under his new name. A stop by a local book shop for information pertaining to the area came next, and then a visit to the grocery store finalized his errands before returning to the docks.

After disarming the security system of the Sabreline, Bryce made his way into its interior. With a lock down of the cabin door, and a quick radar sweep of his yacht's vicinity, he fell into a relaxed state from being in his personal sanctuary once again. Meticulous in the organization of his belongings, he immediately stored his accumulated items from his earlier outing in their proper place.

The moderate rain created a soothing, rhythmic beat on the yachts exterior. Bryce stretched out on the sectional couch in the primary living quarters and took a deep breathe. Time for a break, as he slowly felt himself drifting off to sleep...

... A wooded scene slowly emerged, and Bryce found himself perched atop a tree stand during deer hunting season in his late adolescent period as Jacob Cohen. It was Fall in Montana, and the leaves of the surrounding maples were bursting with color. Cradled in his hands was his late uncle's Winchester Model Seventy. The bolt action rifle was just one of many firearms within his family's household, as both Jacob and his father were avid hunters and target competitors. Each was known throughout the state for their incredible marksmanship.

Jacob began to slowly pan his setting, noticing no wildlife was present. It was an exceptionally slow day, as the area almost felt "dead".

Settling in for a long wait, Jacob observed a crisp breeze had parted the leaves to his left and opened a wide view down the valley. After a prolonged look with his right eye, he managed to spot another hunter in a tree stand approximately three hundred yards away. Jacob raised his gun up to a shooting position and peered though its scope to better examine the individual, noting he was casually sitting in the stand with his rifle resting in his lap.

A very strange feeling came over Jacob. Throughout his life, he had spent countless hours shooting at lifeless, paper targets - objects that were meaningless, and were easily thrown away after their purpose, with no loss to the rest of the world. One question began to drill his mind over and over - What would it be like to take the life of another human being? He occasionally pondered that same question

for years, but its answer was never more intensely wanting to be resolved than now.

Jacob surveyed the other hunter for quite a while as his finger brushed by the safety of his weapon. Should he release it and fire? Who was this individual and did he have a family? Would any one ever find out? He moved the rifle to scope out the man's surroundings. Jacob could find no one else in its sights. Listening only brought the rustle of leaves with no detection of any living thing. He re-sighted the man, aiming for his upper torso. Did the man have any clue what danger he was in? Questions continued to sprint through Jacob's mind as he released the safety, placed his finger on the trigger, and squeezed.

The gun's volume seemed so muffled to Jacob, as he was immersed in his actions. The hunter immediately fell from the tree as a small cloud of red dispersed from his body. He hit the ground hard with no movement beyond his landing. Jacob eyed the body through the scope for what seemed to be an eternity, while assessing his location. His heart raced to some extent, but it all felt surreal. Where was the man hit? Was any one watching?

He made his way down the tree and directly started toward his target when he spotted another individual. The figure stood between him and the fallen hunter, but approximately seventy-five yards to the right. The person stared and slowly started his way. Jacob instantaneously bolted, frantically making his way back to the trail that would take him home, as the woods turned to an orange and brown blur...

Jacob awoke to his yacht, focused on his surroundings, drifted back to Bryce, and locked in on the dream's contents. It's realism to what he experienced that day was on target, and his first kill always

seemed to be the most memorable, as future kills would become numb to his soul.

He continued to recall his past. Local papers reported “BENFIELD VP KILLED IN HUNTING ACCIDENT” the next day. While Jacob was impressed with the man’s title, he recalled being scared to death of every knock at his family’s door, and every phone call to their home, waiting for the police to arrive. It would be months before that greeting occurred, but not by the police.

Shortly after Jacob became of driving age, he was traveling home from a high school basketball game when he was forced to the side of the road by two vehicles. His tires were shot out, a gun was placed to his temple, and an individual entered the passenger’s side with a message that would redirect the rest of his life. It turned out the Org was performing surveillance on the hunter the day Jacob made his decision to experiment with extinguishing a human life. They tracked Jacob back to his home and his identity was in their hands. Given his history as an expert marksman, the Org desired those skills for their own. He was “made” an offer to join them - an offer that if it were declined, would surely lead to his imprisonment for murder or his untimely death by their hands.

A policeman reported to the Cohen‘ home the next day. Jacob’s car was discovered, blood spattered and bullet ridden. His parents were devastated, as they never saw their son again. If only he could have kept the safety on his Winchester that day, not realizing how that one decision could impact his destiny.

Shaking off the history lesson, Bryce stretched and assessed the exterior through the yacht windows.

“Rain, rain, rain. Looks like no jogging today.”

He sat down at the kitchen table to peruse the maps and area

literature from his earlier outing when he came across Melanie's phone number.

"Let's use Plan B for the reference material. Who knows ... it could be fun," he said as he dialed his newly acquired cell phone and was greeted by her answering machine.

"Hello Melanie. Bryce Andrews from the Atlantic Ocean. Just wondering if you were planning to run out of gas on Friday and need a lift to dinner? ..."

Friday afternoon at Signitell had arrived for Melanie and brought a gamut of emotions. While her dinner plans with Bryce caused some apprehension, she anticipated this new adventure in her life. In any event, it took the edge off of Friday's hectic work schedule as the pressure was pushed to the back of her mind.

"Enjoy yourself, and don't put too much thought into it," Nancy said as they briefly met in a hallway.

"Thanks, Nancy. I know, but do you realize this is the first date I've had since Alex and I separated?"

"Girlfriend, who do you think you're talking to? I know more about you than you know about yourself. Of course I know. Hey look, I have to run, but if I don't get a chance to call you this weekend, I want all the dirt on Monday. Agreed?" Nancy said as she began to back down the hallway.

"I don't think there will be any dirt, but I'll give you the scoop. Thanks again, Nance."

After a quick drive home, Melanie went for a run to unwind. She and Bryce were meeting at an area restaurant around seven o'clock, so she had a little time to kill. Out of the shower, and ready to select an outfit, she reached into the closet and removed one of her favorite

sun dresses. Eyeing its gold and black pattern, Melanie remembered the last time she wore it. Its feel brought back a vivid scene from a year ago where she and Alex had gone to dinner for a discussion on their marriage prior to their separation. Melanie was hoping to resolve a few issues to possibly move in a forward direction with him, but Alex became very arrogant and did not want to discuss matters. It was that night that Melanie made the decision to cease their relationship as husband and wife. She slowly moved the dress back to its hanger.

"Stop. I have to look forward," she softly said and put the dress on.

A quick check in the mirror revealed an almost perfect fit.

Bryce arrived at Greg Norman's Australian Grille in North Myrtle Beach around six thirty. While he was always less cautious when not on business, he was sure to arrive early to survey his surroundings before being able to relax.

After completing a review of the exterior, he made his way through the veranda to the interior pub. A large, oval shaped, mahogany bar that seated over twenty people faced him. The setting was bustling with folks who stopped by for a casual drink and others who were waiting for their names to be called for dinner seating. He carefully selected a seat with no windows behind him and an exit nearby.

After some time at the bar, Bryce grabbed a glimpse of Melanie walking into the pub. Her beauty caught him by surprise, as her personal presentation was quite different from the day they met in the Atlantic. Her blonde hair was styled perfectly for her stunning face and tight, athletic body. While he could only see Melanie from mid torso up, he paused on how her sun dress accentuated her breasts. She stopped her walk just before the upper entrance dropped to the pub floor, reviewing the crowd for her date. Bryce observed how the

surrounding male patrons took notice before he raised a hand to draw her attention. She smiled and began her walk to him.

“Very nice,” he mouthed.

“Bryce,” she said as she made her arrival and nodded through her smile.

“Good evening Melanie. I must say, I don’t think you rode the jet ski here tonight.”

“Can I take that as a compliment?”

“You can. You look beautiful.”

Bryce offered his hand as she sat down next to him. Feeling pretty good about his last comment, she felt her nerves ease a bit. While she began to worry when she first entered the Grille, thinking of how it had been such a long time since she had been in a similar dating scenario, his charm seemed to smooth it all out.

Melanie took a second or two to note his appearance. Under his casual jacket, she admired how his crisp, white collared shirt enhanced his olive skin and dark hair. His brown eyes sparkled as he looked into hers, as she was somewhat startled when the bartender approached.

“Good evening, mam. Can I get you a drink?”

“Yes. House red please,” she replied to the bartender before turning her attention back to Bryce.

“Well Melanie, how was your week since we last spoke?”

“Very busy to say the least. I work for a local company that’s currently in a growth spurt. Let’s say the workload is out pacing the employee count,” she said as she glanced for the arrival of her wine. Unfortunately, it was still missing and she could really use a sip.

“And what exactly do you do?” Bryce queried.

“I’m a mechanical design engineer. Basically, it’s my job to stuff ten

pounds of electronics into a five pound box."

"Bravo on your chosen profession. I've heard of a shortage of ladies entering the mechanical sector."

"Thanks. I've always loved the design world, even with its challenges. But I have to admit, I find myself rethinking my career choice more and more."

"And what type of change would you like to make?"

Melanie paused as her wine arrived. After a brief sip and a look off to his side, she smiled with her visual coming to mind.

"I have this dream of opening my own coffee shop. I know the hours would be long, but I think it would be great to run a place where people can come and relax. Just get a way from the rat race for a while. Silly, but I've even picked out a spot"

"Really? Where?" Bryce said.

"Highway Seventeen. The main road into Cherry Grove. I pass it every day to and from work. It's open for lease now. Kind of crazy, but I guess a gal can dream" Melanie said as she looked down.

"Dreams get us from day to day," Bryce added.

"Well, I blabbed enough for now. Tell me about yourself."

"Andrews party of two," said a voice over the speaker system.

"Ah. Saved by the bell. Shall we?" he said as he offered a hand to help her from her seat.

"Sounds great," she said as she accepted his hand.

After meeting the maître d', the couple was escorted to the main dining area which offered handcrafted woods, rich grain leathers, and warm reds and oranges that echoed the Australian Outback. Various Aborigine artworks adorned the walls, while a hand painted ceiling displayed overhead. As they came upon their seats, Bryce was sure to offer a seat to Melanie that was not his personal selection for his

own safety. They admired their stunning view of the Intracostal Waterway through the large bay windows.

“Beautiful restaurant,” Bryce said as he looked around.

“Yes. One of my favorites. So you’re new to the area?”

“Yes. I think I may have mentioned on our boat ride that I recently sailed in from Boston for some real estate business,” Bryce said.

“That you did. I think you also mentioned golf properties”

“Yes. The super properties,” he added as he picked up his menu.

Melanie recalled their initial conversation about his profession, but she found his personal and family life to be more intriguing at the moment. “Time to switch gears,” she thought.

“Were you only brought to the area for real estate business, or any family or friends nearby?” she said.

“Good evening folks. I’m Michael and I’ll be your waiter for this evening. Would you care to start out with an appetizer?”

“I guess we better order first,” Bryce said.

After the waiter left, and through the appetizer, Bryce gave a very calculated and untrue story of his family life, including how his wife passed away seven years ago in a tragic car accident. It seemed to grip Melanie, as her belief and sympathy made his confidence in his date planning grow. She reciprocated with her history with Alex, feeling connected as they each opened up to one another. The main course soon arrived.

“Melanie, so what can you tell a newbie about the area?” Bryce queried as he carved the first piece of his tuna steak.

Melanie gave a fair summary of the region, and its laid back appeal. Bryce soaked in every detail he could, and prodded her when he needed other areas of information, such as local law enforcement, all in a very inconspicuous way.

After wrapping up dinner, neither had room for dessert, but plenty of appetite for discussion. It would be close to eleven before they left the table and Bryce walked her to her car.

“I had a wonderful evening, Bryce. Thank you for dinner and the great conversation,” she said as she leaned her bottom against her car.

“Your very welcome, Melanie. Thank you as well,” he said as he reached for her hands and held them softly.

“Any chance we can steal some time from our busy schedules for another dinner?” Bryce questioned.

“Certainly,” she said.

Bryce leaned to her left side to give her a kiss on the cheek. Not sure of his placement, Melanie turned slightly and caught his lips with hers. She could feel it deep inside. Bryce was initially caught off guard, but could sense a strong, inner sensation as well. They separated and he released her hands.

“Drive safe,” he said.

“You too,” Melanie added, as she got into her car.

Both contemplated the evening on their trips back to their “homes”. While Melanie’s thoughts were more emotional, Bryce reviewed the evening in a business like manner, replaying his offerings to Melanie in the event that any segment would be in error of his plan and cause issues at a later date. While he absorbed her details of Myrtle Beach, he couldn’t help but notice how personal aspects of her kept spider webbing their way into the review of his choreographed conversation. He realized he could dance with this one, but had to be on his toes.

Chapter 6

With sunny skies and high temperatures in the eighties, Monday brought a beautiful late July day to Myrtle Beach. It was a day that would make any one want to play hooky from work, but Melanie was actually looking forward to arriving at Signitell and catching up with Nancy. After leaving home, she made her usually trek through Cherry Grove to Highway Seventeen. She slowed to give a little attention to her dream when passing her perspective coffee shop location.

"On a morning like this, folks could be sipping their favorite blend right out front," she said shaking her head. "Oh well."

She made her way to work, said her usual good mornings, grabbed a seat in her cubicle, and powered up her computer. A glance at the clock made her realize her anticipated conversation with her friend would have to be postponed for a half hour or so, as Nancy usually arrived later. While her computer slowly came to life, she concluded a trip to the cafeteria for that first cup of coffee was in order.

Entering the cafeteria, she absorbed the morning smells as others were preparing to start their days with the same idea and a quick bite or two. Unfortunately, her arrival to the coffee pots showed fresh batches starting to brew, meaning a few more minutes before she had that hot cup in hand. She walked over to the cafeteria windows and peered outside, finding herself in a very rare mood at Signitell - relaxed and in no rush at all.

"Good Morning," Alex said as he caught her off guard to the side.

"Oh. Good morning, Alex. How are you doing today?" she said after a brief glance his way, then back to the window's view.

“I’m doing pretty well. Thanks for asking,” he said, as he recalled how she really had not made a personal inquiry to him in months.

“What a beautiful day. It would be perfect for a ski ride in the Atlantic.”

“That it would. Is every thing alright, Melanie?” he said, as his mind began to spin on her current state.

She continued to look beyond the window, then into her cup, and then over to the full coffee pots. Melanie then looked directly into his eyes with a slight smile.

“It is,” as she maintained eye contact before looking off to the side and then back to the pots. “It really is. Oh! Coffee’s done. I have to run. Have a great day, Alex.”

She walked toward the pots as she left Alex standing in a quandary. She almost made it to her caffeine treasure.

“Stop right there,” Nancy said as she grabbed her arm.

“Nancy! I didn’t expect you for another fifteen minutes.”

“I know, but I wanted to get in here early and catch you. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to call this weekend. It was a crazy. Hey, let’s go to my office,” Nancy replied.

“Sounds great, but I have got to grab a cup,” Melanie said.

Nancy filled up as well, and then they scurried to Nancy’s office like two school girls looking for a hiding spot to gossip. Nancy closed the door with a giggle, and they each took a seat.

“And?” Nancy said.

“And what?” Melanie replied.

“Oh come on!” Nancy said as they both shared a brief laugh.

When the laughter subsided, Melanie gave her summary of the evening’s events with Bryce. Very little detail was left out, leaving Nancy very happy for her friend.

“You’re smiling like a kid at Christmas,” Nancy said.

“I know, Nancy. He’s really a breathe of fresh air to me, given the past year. It feels good, but at the same time, I think I may be just a little gun shy as well.”

“Melanie, it’s only natural to feel that way, but remember what I said on Friday. Enjoy yourself and don’t put too much thought into this right now. You deserve it,” Nancy said.

“You’re right. I may be able to put the guard down a little.”

They continued chatting for quite some time before Melanie realized she was five minutes late for a cost analysis meeting. She noted her pace to its location was not as hurried as usual, and it really felt good to have a diversion from work for a change.

In another part of South Carolina late that same morning, Bryce was placing his guard up.

He arrived in Conway, a small town about 10 miles inland from Myrtle Beach. Although it offered historic sites and beautiful views of the Waccamaw River, Bryce’s sightseeing tour focused on only one setting - a business where he planned to take the lives of multiple people.

Stopping his Suburban in a somewhat full, shared parking lot in a fairly secluded business park, he was intent on beginning several non-consecutive days of surveillance. To the front passenger’s side of his vehicle, he locked in on his target. A sign centered above its beige facade read “Recov, Incorporated”.

“Bingo,” he said, as he began transforming his vehicle’s interior into a small operations center while its dark tinted windows gave him total privacy. Out of its storage case and mounted to the dash was a high definition video camera aimed at the front door. Next to it, Bryce

placed its companion, a still photo camera with a lens capable of making mountains out of moles from his distance to Recov's entrance. After the video equipment, the audio gear rolled out. First came the cellular and radio frequency interceptor, then the wireless network interceptor rounded out his myriad. It was always hit or miss whether his intended target used a wired or wireless network, but it was worth a shot.

"Good to go. Let's see what's happening over the air waves," he said as he brought his stock to life.

Immediately, the RF interceptor's display locked on to a strong signal. Bryce's eyes opened wide, curious as to what the area's buildings were pumping out. He placed his headphones on and tuned into the communication leakage.

"... accounts can be reviewed at any time. I realize it's a bi-monthly fee, but is there any ..."

His interest increased as the words kept sputtering to him.

"OK. Give me some clues. Where is this coming from?" he said softly.

The sentences kept coming and coming. It was all mumbo jumbo business talk that gave no specific answers to its origin. Finally, after twenty minutes of eaves dropping, a word struck him like a lightning bolt.

" ... I completely understand. But how can I explain these outrageous fees to my manager? You need to realize, Recov ..."

"Recov? Holy shit! Who's tapping into this place?" Bryce said as removed the headphones and stared at the front door.

He sat for a moment to contemplate the issue at hand. It was obvious someone had a bug inside the Recov facility and was pumping out its business blood. Who were they? Were they part of

law enforcement or on the opposite end of the spectrum? In any event, he knew he now had company to contend with in completing his mission. His plan had to back up a few steps prior to moving forward. Finding this individual or group would be his first task, as he could not deal with witnesses to his anticipated blood bath.

He immediately jumped on the Internet, researching the names of nearby businesses to see if they had a legitimate presence. It was possible that the listeners may have established a ghost organization with a close location to Recov to watch its activities. Unfortunately, all seemed to pan out.

Bryce shut down his gear, surveyed the area for a few minutes, and then slowly stepped out of the Suburban. To any passing eye, they would see an old man exiting his vehicle, hunched back, cane and all. Being one of his favorite disguises for this segment of his adventures, the act would allow him to slowly walk around the area and absorb every detail without any cause for alarm.

Around the parking lot he went, noticing nothing out of the ordinary. All vehicles seemed to be void of individuals sitting with surveillance time to kill. He made his way to the side of the building, an area that contained a small parking lot backed by trees. The back of the building displayed the same setting, with a grassy hill beyond the trees that extended to a parking lot upward and beyond his sight. One entrance door lived on the back wall of Recov.

A full walk of the area revealed nothing, so it was time to go more mobile. Bryce entered the Suburban and continued his assessment of the area. His curiosity took him to the parking lot beyond the rear of Recov. It was fairly secluded with additional trees surrounding it, and not many vehicles utilizing its capacity. As he came around a corner, one vehicle stood out beyond the others - a white van with dark tinted

windows and no business signage. He kept driving beyond it, intending to offer no suspicion to any possible occupants, and parked in the adjacent lot. He was sure to have a line of sight with this new target.

Bryce grabbed a small electronic device from the rear of the Suburban. He connected it to the interception display, powered it up and aimed it through the open driver's side window. It placed a small, red laser dot on the side of the van. Almost instantly, the display danced with electronic leakage coming from the vehicle. It was live with energy, and he knew this was who he was looking for, but their signals offered no clue to their identification.

"Great. Well, at least you guys took care of bugging the place for me," he mumbled.

Bryce found himself traveling to Cherry Grove on Friday evening. After a phone call with Melanie planned date number two, she requested he pick her up at her house as opposed to meeting some where. To her it was an old fashioned thing, but he was far from keen on the idea. Although he liked to mix into his environment, this seemed to be a little too close for comfort at this time.

"What am I doing? I'm planning to kill people in a few weeks and I'm out chasing tail. Oh well, all work and no play makes Jacob, or Bryce, or Charlie, or whoever the hell I am a dull boy," he said.

Cherry Grove was comprised of Highway Seventeen, which brought locals and vacationers in and out of its area, and Ocean Boulevard, which ran parallel to the Atlantic. Much like Melanie's area, the rest of the community was made up of condominiums and beach homes. As close as it was to the central hub of Myrtle Beach, it seemed to maintain that small beach town appeal.

Bryce pulled onto forty-ninth avenue north, parked at Melanie's home, and took a minute to evaluate the surroundings before stepping out. He was impressed with her style of her architecture. After making his way up the front stairs, his knock at the door was greeted by Melanie.

"Hello stranger. Come on in. I'll be just a second. I want to run upstairs and grab a light jacket in case it cools down tonight," Melanie said with a warm smile.

Bryce entered the living room and noted how her perfume perforated his senses as she walked away and up the steps. He then began a detailed scan of the few family photos she setup on various tables. He recognized Collin quickly by Melanie's prior description, then focused on an older photo of Alex, not quite sure if he was the ex. He listened for Melanie, and then picked up the photo. It was uncommon for Bryce to feel any form of jealously in his past, but for some reason, he sensed a mix of just that with a little curiosity. He quickly placed it back in its previous location when he heard Melanie start down the upstairs steps. The phone began to ring.

"OK. Finally ready to go," Melanie said.

"Do you want to take the call?"

"Nah. Probably a sales call any way."

Before they were out the door, the answering machine picked up.

"Hello, Melanie. It's Alex. I just wanted to see if you had time to chat. You had me thinking about our conversation earlier in the week ..."

"Let's go," Melanie said as she pulled the door closed.

They began walking down the steps, with neither really knowing what to say. Several questions came to Bryce's mind, but stopped at his mouth. Melanie felt a little embarrassed, and while she

occasionally fought feelings for Alex, they tended to diminish given the recent week's events. She too felt things were better left unsaid for now.

"Hey, Mom," Collin said as he came around the corner of the house and stopped abruptly when he saw Bryce.

Melanie had not mentioned Bryce to him, thinking it would be better to give things a little more time to pan out between she and Bryce. She knew Collin was very close to his father, and she wasn't sure how he would accept a replacement, whether temporary or eventually permanent. She also assumed Collin would be at Kimberley's for the afternoon and evening.

"Hi, Collin. I wasn't expecting you," Melanie said.

"Kimberley got called into the hospital at the last minute for evening shift," he replied.

A brief moment of silence occurred, as Collin evaluated Bryce.

"Well, I would like to introduce you to a friend of mine. Bryce Andrews, this is my son, Collin," she said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Bryce said as they shook hands.

"Likewise. Well, I better run," Collin said as he turned towards the stairs, trying to hide the uneasy feeling that consumed him at the moment.

"Collin. I'd like to catch up with you tomorrow morning. OK?" Melanie said.

No answer was given by her son as he made his way into the house. Between the Alex and Collin incidents, Melanie finally let her thoughts pass through her mouth.

"I'm sorry. I'm new to this. My ex-husband ..." she said with her hand over her eyes.

"Melanie, no need to apologize. Relax and let's have a good time.

Now where is this surprise dinner you're taking me to?" Bryce interrupted, as he gently grabbed her hand from her eyes and held it.

"OK. Get it together, Mel. We're going to Broadway at the Beach. I'll drive," she said, as her smile slowly got past the frown.

The forty minute drive and jovial conversation broke the earlier tension. Both felt more at ease over time, as Melanie got past her embarrassment, and Bryce forgot about not only work, but Alex as well.

After they arrived at their destination, they took some time to soak in the sights. Broadway at the Beach was located in the heart of Myrtle Beach. Its center, a twenty three acre lake, was encompassed by a beautiful boardwalk. Over one hundred specialty shops and a variety of restaurants outlined the setting. Its splendor drew a large crowd on a comfortable Friday evening.

Melanie led Bryce to one of her favorite restaurants and its Caribbean flair. The Key West Grill was situated on both land and water, as its exterior dining deck was perched over the lake. After a short wait for dinner seating, they were lead to a table for two on the deck's perimeter. Their view was filled with beautiful nearby lake scenes, garnished with images of people strolling the boardwalk at a distance. It gave both a calm feeling.

"Melanie, I have to say, excellent choice," Bryce said as they caught each others glance.

After a delicious dinner of swordfish and mahi-mahi, they chatted away over cold coffee drinks while freely sharing stories about their past. While Melanie remained honest in hers, Bryce again kept up his part of planned offerings. She was slowly breaking his chill when his cell phone rang.

"Hello. Bryce Andrews. Santerra Realty," he said as he smiled

towards her.

“Yes. I’d love to discuss the property setbacks with you Mr. Carter, but I’m currently with a very important client. Can I call you tomorrow?”

He wrapped up the phone call with a laugh and noticed Melanie blushing just a bit.

After giving up their seats to waiting patrons, they walked the boardwalk and absorbed its various visual offerings.

“Oh! Fireworks! If they’re still on the schedule, they’ll shoot fireworks off at ten o’clock. Let’s grab a good spot on the rail,” Melanie said, leading him by the hand.

Being a big crowd pleaser, the rails of the boardwalk filled up quickly. Melanie grabbed a rail front position, while Bryce stood behind her. As he placed his hands on her shoulders, she thought of how good it felt to enjoy a human touch again, especially given a human of his qualities. She smiled beyond his view.

The fireworks began, prompting oohs and ahs from the crowd. Slowly, Bryce’s hands made their way down her back and around the front portion of her waist. Of all thoughts, she was glad she had continued her regiment of sit-ups over the past months, as she could feel his fingers separate across the striations in her abs. He pulled her bottom close to his front and she rested the back of her head on his upper chest, as they snuggled while standing. She rotated to face him when the grand finale began, looked into his eyes, and offered a small kiss to his lips.

They rounded out the evening by visiting the nightlife section at Broadway. Night clubs adorned both sides of a pedestrian only avenue, reminiscent of a scene from Bourbon Street in New Orleans. Inside one of the clubs they went. While dancing came natural to both,

their styles complimented each other even more. It was a great way to round out the evening for both.

Melanie and Bryce arrived at the front of her house around one thirty in the morning. She parked the car, and he thanked her for the dinner and tour.

“Well. Looks like we’re two for two so far,” she said.

“Meaning?” Bryce queried.

“Nice dates,” she replied.

Their smiles diminished as they were drawn to each others kiss. After a few minutes, Melanie began to anguish over an invitation for him to come up to her house. As quickly as the thought came, it was replaced with a thought of Collin.

“I better go. Call me, OK?” Melanie said as she reached for the door handle of her vehicle and began to exit, causing Bryce to follow her lead.

He stood outside his vehicle and watched her climb the stairs and disappear from his view.

Driving along Highway Seventeen, Bryce spotted a self serve car wash to the right. He parked his Suburban in one of its bays, exited, and proceeded to sweep the vehicle with a detector to ensure electronic devices of any kind were not placed on it. When he made his way back on Highway Seventeen, he continued surveying all mirrors to watch for any following vehicles. He pondered how nice it would be to just pause and enjoy the evening’s events like a normal human being. Some day ...

Chapter 7

Bryce gazed at the ceiling of his yacht, listening to the sound of an August storm tapping on its exterior. Its pattern was steady, only to be disturbed by an occasional large drop falling from the bow railing onto its deck. He thought of how he loved the rain and how its presence slowed the day of busy folk. It was a time when every one had an excuse to stay indoors and catch up on their to-do list, or just relax. His meditation on the weather's cadence helped alleviate his mind of thoughts that kept him awake for almost an hour prior, as his waking moment kicked off with a flurry of upcoming mission visuals.

"Good morning, folks. It's five forty-five. Happy Wednesday to you! Time for weather and traffic on the fives. Our forecast for today … and its good news for the beach goers … the rain that crept in earlier in the week should be wrapping up by noon. Highs in the lower eighties. For tonight ..."

Bryce reached for the ship's audio system remote to kill the unwelcomed radio wake up call. He anticipated wrapping up the surveillance of Recov by week's end. All employees were visually identified, and their times of arrival and departure were logged, but one key piece of data was missing ... the best time to sweep the place and terminate its occupants.

"Back to the office," he said while rising.

With breakfast wrapped up, Bryce was on the road just before seven. He ditched the idea of the geriatric disguise, as he intended to focus on audio surveillance today. Weather-wise, it was a good day to stay inside the Suburban.

Driving towards Conway, he got lost in the tempo of the windshield

wipers at a long red light. He wondered about Melanie and where she was. Knowing her, she was probably on her way to Signitell, passing by her coffee shop at that exact moment. He visualized her innocent smile at the Key West Grille last Friday night, and almost felt guilty for allowing his yacht's computer to place a call to his cell phone and giving him an opportunity to strengthen his real estate business facade with her. It was a guilty feeling that was quickly erased, as he knew he had to stay focused on his task at hand and keep any prying eye off his trail. A sudden green light snapped him back to his intentions.

Bryce entered the business park that was home to Recov. He noted the white van in its usual location, and then parked his vehicle on a lot beyond the immediate side lot of Recov. No line of sight was planned with the white van and its owners today, as Bryce wanted to be completely inconspicuous to them.

He sat a pair of binoculars on the dash, and then proceeded to fire up the radio frequency interceptor to tap into the bugs the van's occupants so kindly setup for him. Through a few hours of listening during prior days, Bryce determined that they had a total of three placed inside the building, and deciphered their general locations. He initiated his equipment to scan the frequencies on five minute intervals, in hopes he would catch a conversation worth noting. The change also helped him from losing interest quickly during a portion of the mission he was never thrilled about. Words were not quite as exciting as watching some one's life expire from gunfire.

With a low beep, the frequency set to bug number one locked in. It was located in the office of Nathan Fitzgerald, a target listed on the Org memory stick and co-owner of Recov. Soft music came to Bryce's ears with no human voices detected. The office was vacant for the

time being.

He manually switched to the frequency of bug number two, with its location being in the conference room. Again, silence.

Another manual switch to bug number three. Its location was in the office of Edward Robell, yet another listed target and co-owner. Bryce's ears perked as a voice flooded his vehicle's interior, prompting him to lower the volume.

"... don't have time to deal with this right now, Donna. You know I've been under a great deal of stress at work. It's your responsibility to focus on Kyle's high school matters right now. I have a full time job to deal with while you're a stay at home mom. You need ..."

Bryce recognized Edward's voice immediately. The pauses of silence in the conversation meant he was on the phone. Arguing with his wife seemed to be a common occurrence recently.

"... when I get home. OK? I can't solve this issue right now. I have to prep for a meeting in three minutes. Good bye," Edward said, followed by a slamming phone that stung Bryce's hearing.

"Don't worry Eddie baby, I'll resolve all your issues shortly," Bryce said with a smirk.

He continued listening to Edward's office, with no additional tidbits to go on. Bryce hoped the mentioned meeting would take place in one of the bugged locations, as he quickly scanned all three at the top at the hour.

"... ahead and close the door. Set the phone on private. We have to discuss this," the voice of Nathan Fitzgerald said from the conference room.

Bryce unwrapped a nutrition bar and got comfortable in his seat.

"You both know as well as I do that the business path we've taken was a bad choice. A really bad choice. But we're stuck in it now. I

know our market has been declining due to foreign competition. All three of us are diving into some serious debt here, and we considered the Espozito deals to bring us back up to par, but what the hell were you thinking, Vijay?" Nathan said.

"Look, Nathan. Vijay thought he had this whole thing planned out to where we wouldn't look dirty," Edward Robell said.

Bryce got a cold chill down the back of his neck. His primary target set was in one room. Informational pay dirt had finally arrived.

"The hackers I hired were the best around, Nathan. I had all my confidence in them," Vijay said.

Although he wasn't quite sure what they were responsible for, Bryce had two hackers as a secondary and final target set. Clues to their actual identities would only come from Recov, with the Org and its client having very little data on them.

"Let me enlighten you here, Vijay. We're dealing with the freaking American mob! They don't give a flying rat's ass whose fault it was. It's dirt on our hands now!" Nathan yelled.

"We fixed the problem, Nathan. It took a little while, but Espozito should have no issues with us," Edward said, attempting a calming voice that was only partially effective.

"Espozito should have no issues with us. But do you know what Ed? I've tried to contact him repeatedly with absolutely no reciprocation. He's freaking pissed, and you don't want the mob pissed at you! They don't tell you when they're gonna put a god damn bullet in your head! They just do it!" Nathan yelled.

"He's got a point there guys," Bryce chuckled.

The room went silent for about twenty seconds. Bryce scrambled on the interceptor, thinking he lost the signal, when Nathan's voice popped up again.

“OK. Here’s what we’re going to do. Next Tuesday evening, we’re going to put on the best kiss ass act we can conjure up. We call Espozito and make him an offer to take on another deal at absolutely no cost to him as a reconciliatory measure. We’ll take full responsibility for the previous issues, but we make him fully aware that we’ve patched all our holes three times over, and he couldn’t find a safer house to do business with. We’re going to do this at six in the evening, meaning three Espozito’s time. And Vijay, if you come up with another dumb ass idea, you discuss it with Ed or I first before you make a move!”

Silence.

“I’ll set it up with Espozito. I want no back outs on this man when Tuesday comes,” Nathan said.

The meeting wrapped up shortly thereafter. Bryce had what he was looking for and allowed his mind the pleasure of mulling it for a little while. Next Tuesday at six in the evening, all three would be onsite after business hours, and when he sweeps them, and if Espozito is the client, the client is going to hear them die.

“I better get a freaking bonus for this one,” he said, shutting down the equipment.

Going on his best guess, Bryce intended to tell the Org they had to make the Espozito call happen on his end, with no further information or explanation.

The rain broke on his drive back to Myrtle Beach Yacht Club, ending in a clear blue sky by the time he hit the docks. Bryce would have approximately five days to prepare for the slaughter.

“So how did things go with Collin last Saturday, Mel?” Bryce asked.

“Well. About as I would have expected,” Melanie said, placing a finished chicken wing down and reaching for a quick sip of her beer before continuing.

Date number three brought them to a casual venue on Friday evening. Melanie’s work week was quite overwhelming, causing her to request a more laid back get together at Buffalo Wild Wings in North Myrtle Beach. Being a sports bar, it was a spot she new would offer casual food, cold drinks, and a large selection of televisions to unwind. Hoping to wrap up dinner early, they anticipated an evening stroll on the beach.

“You see, he’s always been very close to his father, Bryce. He’s always been close to me as well. I just think Collin is going to have a tough time accepting any one into my world no matter who they are,” Melanie said.

“I understand,” Bryce said as he stopped eating.

“You see. I was thinking Collin wasn’t going to be at the house last Friday night. He had plans with his girlfriend that got cancelled. In the long run, I thought I would introduce him to you at a more opportune time depending on how things were working out.”

Bryce smiled and sat back in his chair.

“And, how are things working out?” he said.

Melanie tried to hide her smile behind her next chicken wing.

“Well, let’s just say I don’t plan on using the ”running out of gas“ trick any time soon to meet another guy,” she said and looked into his eyes.

He laughed and went back to eating.

“No. In all honesty, I’m really enjoying my time with you Bryce. This is all new to me though, so I hope you understand if I skew here and there,” she said reaching for a wet napkin.

“No problem. I ...”

“By the way. You seem more relaxed than usual. How was the real estate week?” she interrupted, hoping to move on to another topic that didn’t make her feel quite so uncomfortable.

He sipped his beer and paused before answering.

“Real estate is going well. Let’s just say a few things fell into place this week,” Bryce answered.

“Hey, Melanie!” a voice interrupted from behind Bryce.

Bryce didn’t immediately turn, as he hesitated due to the familiarity of the individual’s tone. A fine line was always kept between pleasure and business, but that line was about to be smudged.

“Ed! Hey! What are you doing here?” Melanie said as she stood from the table.

The face of the voice stepped into Bryce’s view, but only looked in the direction of Melanie. Bryce instantly recognized Edward Robell. He could feel his heart beat begin to escalate, as he had never experienced a scenario of meeting a target before a sweep. Connecting to them through surveillance was one thing, but connecting to them in real life was a complete throw off from his natural balance.

“Oh, Donna didn’t feel like cooking tonight so I thought I’d pick up dinner. The wings should be up in a few minutes,” Edward said.

“Great! Well have a seat for a minute. Oh Bryce. This is my brother, Ed Robell,” Melanie said, directing her attention to Bryce.

Bryce stood up and shook Edward’s hand, feeling his own hand beginning an unanticipated sweat. He wondered how this could be happening, or was it some strange joke fate was throwing his way.

“Pleasure to meet you Bryce,” Edward said before sitting at the table.

“Excuse me folks. Let me hit the restroom and clean my hands. I’ll be right back,” Bryce said as he started to back towards the restroom.

Bryce made it the men’s room, turned on the cold water, dashed his hands in its path, and brought them to his face. He locked his hands on the sink bowl and glared at his eyes in the mirror.

“You need to get it together,” he muttered.

He took a few minutes to evaluate the situation at hand. Various thoughts crossed his mind on how to block out the connection he was just introduced to, but none seemed to dim the sting. Bryce knew he had to get back out there before Melanie became concerned. As he exited the restroom, he could see the two of them talking and smiling.

“Sorry about that folks. Just wanted to tidy up,” Bryce said as he came up to their table and grabbed a seat, trying not to look Edward directly in the eye.

“So Bryce, Melanie tells me you’re in the real estate business. How’s the Myrtle Beach market treating you?” Edward said.

Bryce assembled and delivered a reply that seemed to echo in his head. He wasn’t quite sure if it made sense. He focused on Edward’s chin, and continued to avoid eye contact.

“Bryce, Ed is a part owner of Recov in Conway,” Melanie said, drawing Bryce’s eyes directly to hers.

“How’s business?” she said as she turned toward Edward.

“Mel, I wish I could say it was better, but between the market decline and the recent mistakes my partners have made, I have to say I’m feeling the financial squeeze right now,” Edward said as his smile departed.

“Pick up for Robell,” a voice echoed over the loud speaker.

“That’s me. Sorry I have to run, but I’m late already. I’ll call you, Mel. And, Bryce, it was a pleasure meeting you,” Edward said as he

turned in Bryce's direction.

"Likewise," Bryce said, as their eyes met for an unexpected fraction of a second.

Bryce flashed to the surveillance conversations he heard at Recov, recollecting how Edward Robell seemed to be the good guy caught in the middle of the sad actions of Nathan Fitzgerald and Vijay Patel. He was going to die because of them, and to top it off, Melanie was going to be devastated. He could feel his pores soaking themselves with sweat.

"Bryce, are you OK?" Melanie said.

Bryce's daze broke to see Melanie's face, with Edward out of sight.

"Yeah. I am. I'm just feeling a little off right now. Do you mind if we get some fresh air?"

"Sure thing, Bryce," Melanie replied. "Waiter. Check please."

Sunday morning's run for Bryce ended as he approached a table in the Myrtle Beach Yacht Club picnic area. He sat on its table top and positioned his feet on its bench. His elbows found his knees to be a restful support as he gazed at a family of ducks in the water. It was a run that was well needed.

"Why do things have to get complicated?" he said to himself.

Just two hours prior, his waking mind bounced thoughts of Melanie and Edward and assassinations and the Org and being on the run and having a life that was normal in no way whatsoever. He had to purge his curse with exercise, but the exercise only somewhat helped.

"I need to focus. I need to get through this and evaluate my next move. I need to block out all connections. I need to be professional as usual," he said quietly.

He wouldn't get up from that position until almost a half an hour

later, recalling nothing that went on around him during that time frame as he fought his mind and beat his demons. Or so he thought.

Chapter 8

Bryce stared into the hotel mirror, almost not recognizing himself. With the aid of his make-up case and a photo taken of one of the utility workers who had been frequenting the Recov business park over the past few days, his transformation was almost complete for termination day, even down to a temporary tattoo that matched the right side of his model's neck. It was close, but no cigar. With red hair tucked under his utility cap, a pale makeup base on his face, and a four inch long beard added to only his chin, the one remaining trait of himself was found in his unchanged right eye. His color correcting lens would not be used today to allow his gifted clarity to be utilized to its full potential.

Once again, thin Kevlar body armor came next over his torso, legs, and arms. While he doubted it would be needed in this situation, he played on the cautious side in case he was the recipient of gunfire instead of the distributor. He then turned his attention to the arsenal and personal gear that was carefully laid out on the table, slowly inspecting each piece and meticulously placing it on his body. His matching Sig-Sauer pistols and silencers got extra attention before going to their holsters on his back. A utility man's pants and work jacket hid his equipment from view.

A final inspection of his new character, followed by a detailed review of the target data he acquired made him feel complete to begin his mission. He stepped out of the motel room and walked to his Suburban. Its tags were already replaced with out of town substitutes to throw off any prying eye during the evening. He took a last look at the dingy hotel before entering his vehicle, noting the vacancy sign

was only partially working. While he was accustomed to better living conditions, he knew the hotel only served as a temporary setup point where no one would care enough to question his change in appearance. Given the hotel's probable low budget, Bryce figured they would not be afforded the luxury of security cameras to keep an eye on the tenants. All worked in his favor except for time, as it was getting later than expected. It was four o'clock on Tuesday, with less than two hours for him to make his grand entrance at Recov.

The drive to the utility vehicle parking lot would be less than ten minutes. Bryce passed the Conway Utility Service sign, and then parked the Suburban in a wooded area approximately a quarter mile from the lot. He grabbed his gear and began a swift walk through the woods to the unfenced area where the trucks were kept. A brief survey showed no individuals in the vicinity. After selecting a company service van in the far corner of the lot, Bryce popped the lock and settled inside. Inside the dash, he found the yellow ignition wires and black ground wire, and then touched them to the blue starter wire. He then pushed a flathead screwdriver against the steering column locking pin. In less than five minutes, he was out of the parking lot and headed towards Recov.

Bryce arrived at the Recov parking lot around five twenty. A quick review of the front, side, and rear lots showed his primary target set of three was onsite, with approximately four other individuals inside. A cursory glance up the rear hill showed the white van in its usual spot. Knowing they would definitely be present to tape Tuesday night's teleconference with Espozito, he had to pay them a visit first.

After parking the utility service van in the lot that was adjacent to the white van's location, Bryce assessed the area. The parking lots were fairly empty, as the area businesses typical shut down around

five in the evening. Only Recov seemed to draw a crowd tonight. He glanced down at his watch, as five forty-two stared back. With a few moments to spare, he began a journey into a light trance, anticipating all the events that would play out that evening. He noticed how his body felt almost “centered”, which he attributed to an early eight mile run and the intake of two muscle relaxers. Twitching muscles due to tight nerves were not an option, given he had to be in a completely fluid state in the upcoming hour. The trance suddenly dispersed, causing him to take another look at his watch. It was five fifty-nine.

“Time to rock and roll,” Bryce said as he donned a pair of thin gloves and opened the door of the utility service van.

He smoothly walked to the white van while becoming one with his environment, noting any slight change in his surroundings, and removing a heavy duty spring loaded center punch from his belt. He arrived on the passenger side, just behind the door. Without even a pause, he immediately placed the center punch against the van door’s window using his left hand, fired it, and the glass dropped out with very little noise. His right hand was already cradling one of the Sig-Sauers tucked on his back. Bryce stepped in full view of the van’s occupants, with care to be out of blood spatter range, and brought the pistol up for aim at the silhouette of their heads. He squeezed the trigger twice and the silencer deadened the blast to just small clicking sounds. Evidenced by the flash of the gun, he could see the head of the passenger’s side individual explode. It was an almost solid right eye shot. The second shot caught the driver’s side passenger almost dead center between the eyes. Neither made a noise, as their blood and gray matters dripped from the van’s interior.

Bryce took a short look around the parking lot with nothing catching his eye. He removed thin plastic gloves and a small plastic

sheet from his pocket. After placing plastic gloves over his existing cloth pair and situating the sheet on his front, he opened the van door and began checking the duo for identification. He flipped open the first wallet he came across.

“FBI. Shit!” Bryce mumbled.

Assuming they were a typical field unit just recording information, he hoped they were not pumping live data to another group. A glance around the exterior revealed no transmission antennas, so he thought it was safe to shut the van down. He began clicking power switches, dumped the plastic gloves and sheet inside, and closed the door. He made his way back to the utility service van.

“Two down, seven to go,” Bryce said while stepping back into his borrowed vehicle.

A rapid black light scan showed no evidence of blood. He then drove to the back of Recov and wedged a piece of lumber between the door knob and the stair railing. This would ensure the exit would not be used an egress during his sweep. Back in the vehicle, he drove directly to Recov’s front door. It was six twelve.

Bryce viewed the receptionist through the front door. His vehicle caught her attention before turning back to her work. He walked to the front door hoping it was still unlocked. A tug solidified his wish, as it opened and allowed him to enter the lobby.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist said.

“Good evening mam. I’m with Conway Utility Service. We’ve been doing electrical work in the area and I wanted to verify our surge twenty minutes ago didn’t damage your breaker panel. If it did, we’ll gladly cover the repair costs. Would you mind if I take a look?” Bryce said.

The receptionist paused for a few seconds before replying. Bryce

noted her young age, with this possibly being her first job in the business world.

“Sure. I’ll take you back to Michael. He’s our facilities coordinator. Follow me,” she replied.

The receptionist got up from her desk and began walking down a long hallway that appeared to open into a warehouse area, with no sign of employees. Every thing began to slow down for Bryce, as he reached around the front of her face and cupped her mouth with his hands. He forced her into a carefully selected office to the right, closing the door with his foot.

“Don’t ... make ... a sound,” he said during their entrance while shoving the silencer of the Sig-Sauer into her back.

To Edward Robell, Tuesday began as just another day. After finishing his morning shower and getting dressed, he made his way down to the kitchen of his home. It wasn’t just an ordinary kitchen in an ordinary house though. His past business success offered him the luxury of living in a fifty-four hundred square foot residence just beyond the ninth hole of Long Bay Golf Course. Designed by Jack Nicklaus and offering him a short commute to work in Conway, the course gave Edward plenty of desire and time to pursue his passion for the sport. Unfortunately, business and family matters had recently diminished that passion.

“Good morning, Donna,” he said to his wife as he grabbed a seat next to her at the kitchen table.

She smiled but offered no reply, as the past few weeks became tense around the Robell household due to their son’s rebellion with high school, and current summer school commitment.

“What time is our appointment with Kyle’s counselor?” Edward

inquired.

“I haven’t had a chance to make one, Ed” she replied.

“Donna, we went over this almost a week ago. I asked you to setup an appointment for him so we can start getting him focused on eleventh grade. What the hell is the problem?”

“Don’t cuss at me! I’ve been busy myself lately,” she said as she jumped up from the table.

“Doing what? You don’t work! You’re primary job right now is keeping our son on track when I’m not here.”

“You know I’ve been busy with summer events for the Conway Lady’s Auxiliary. I’m sorry. I guess I’ve just got side tracked recently,” Donna said.

“Like I said, that crap should take second place to any of our family issues. I bust my ass every day to give us the lifestyle we want. You need to take the reigns once in a while and help keep him on track. Once I get through this latest mess at work, I’ll have plenty of time to devote to his issues, Donna,” Edward said as he got up from the table and stormed down the hall to their upper level stairs.

Edward finished preparing to leave for Recov in the bedroom. At eight fifteen that morning, he came downstairs and made his way to the garage. Donna was in the laundry room. He tried to pass by without drawing her attention, being too pissed to talk to her.

“I’ll take care of the appointment today, Ed. I hope you have a good day. I love you,” she said in a reconciliatory tone.

Edward looked her in the eye and thought about replying. He felt his silence would back up his stance and anger. Although he realized it was some what immature, he said nothing to her as he got into his car and left for Recov.

After arriving at the office, Edward settled in at his desk. Donna

called twice that morning, but he decided to let her be redirected to his voicemail. He sat back and reflected on the issues at hand, including business and family items before making a bee line to Nathan Fitzgerald's office.

"Nathan, got a sec?" Edward said as he stopped in Nathan's doorway.

"Sure thing. Come on, Ed," Nathan replied.

Edward closed the door behind him and sat down. Nathan could sense his tension.

"I've been thinking about the Espozito thing. Well, not just the Espozito thing, but the business area we've ventured into and really shouldn't have," Edward said.

"Relax, Ed. We're going to iron every thing out with Espozito tonight."

Edward sat silent for a moment before replying, his hands clasped together between his legs.

"I've been giving it some thought, Nathan. After we reconcile with Espozito this evening, I want a clean break. I know you don't have the cash flow to buy me out right now, and that's OK, but I need to move out of this mess and start fresh," Edward said with a straight look on his face.

Nathan sat back in his chair, exhaled, and then looked Edward straight in the eye.

"I understand. Let's talk about it tomorrow. OK?" Nathan said.

Edward didn't reply. He left Nathan's office, feeling like a huge weight was just released from his shoulders and he could finally breathe again. He got through the day anticipating being able to focus on Kyle. Unfortunately, he didn't take the time to return Donna's call.

Bryce knew his usefulness of the receptionist had expired. He was right where he wanted to be, inside Recov and able to do whatever he damn well pleased. He slowly walked her to the far wall of the office, within a few inches of its face. His action wasn't arbitrary, as he knew this wall was backed by brick that separated Recov and the business next door. Brick could absorb his bullet without penetrating other walls and causing unwanted attention. He could sense the fear bursting out of her body, wanting to fill the room with sound by voice, but instead transforming into intense quivering. Her rapid heartbeat could be felt in his hand as it cupped her mouth. He wondered if she knew she was going to die.

He wedged the silencer just off one side of her spine, aiming for her heart. He slowly squeezed the trigger while looking at the back of her head. The gun made one deadly clicking noise, as the white wall in front of her splattered with blood when her heart popped.

Bryce didn't know her personally, but again, that always made it easier for him. If he would have known her, he would have found out she was Pam Daugherty, twenty two, and a single mom of a very cute and rambunctious three year old boy named Gavin. She only worked part time at Recov, filling in for their full time receptionist in the off hours while working her way through college.

Through Pam's eyes and body, she first saw the blood splatter on the wall in front of her before feeling the intense pain and burning in her chest. The numbness quickly gripped her body and its fingers tried to remove her soul. Her last vision was of Gavin sitting on the new tricycle his grandparents just bought him over the weekend, then blackness crept in from all sides and sealed off her world.

Bryce slowly slid her body down the wall and to the floor. He carefully listened, wondering if the event would bring any one to his

vicinity. Silence was in the air. He removed the second Sig-Sauer from its holster and began to open the door slowly. The hallway was clear and he could now hear muffled voices down a hallway to his left. Anticipating that was the location of the teleconference with Espozito, Bryce decided to save them for last. Moving towards the right, he allowed each pistol to lead his way by peering into offices on either side. If an outsider could see his sweeping motion, they would describe it as totally fluid, as if he were liquid creeping around each office wall, allowing the silencer to enter first. He locked onto the last office on the right, just before the warehouse area began. Jazz music was pumping beyond its door.

Bryce rounded the corner, letting his right pistol lead the way. He immediately pulled its trigger on a man sitting behind a desk. Again, another right eye shot, but the man didn't immediately fall over. Bryce felt like the older, slightly overweight gentleman sat there for a second, looking at him, wondering "who was this asshole that just blew my eye out?" The feeling faded fast as Michael Kraft's head fell to his desk. Known to friends and family as a workaholic, they often joked that he would die at his job, but they most likely could not have imagined this.

Unfortunately, the exiting bullet didn't hit a soft wall this time. It managed to go through the drywall and strike a printer on the opposite side. The device's explosion brought attention from the back of the building, evidenced by footsteps that became louder. Bryce ducked in the office, hoping not to give clues to the inquisitive minds that were heading his way. A smile grew across his face as a challenge shot came to mind. He patiently awaited their arrival.

The individuals who were to meet Bryce next were actually not employees of Recov, but employees of an outsourced cleaning crew.

Doug Bannicek and Carry Fines were in the back of the building filling buckets in preparation of mopping Recov's tiled floors. Working mostly in the after hours when businesses closed their doors, the pair occasionally took the opportunity to have sex in the empty offices for the thrill of it. While he was married and she was not, investigators would later find his semen in her dead body and have to report this to his wife. A tragedy on top of another tragedy, literally.

Bryce timed their footsteps perfectly. As they neared, he rounded the corner of the office with both Sig-Sauer aimed at their faces. They had no time to even flinch as he squeezed the triggers simultaneously. Both of their right eyes turned into dark red voids as the backs of their heads exploded. His body dropped straight backwards, as hers spun somewhat before falling. Again, the bullets landed loudly, hitting the back storage racks. Bryce felt his sense of surprise had to be up, but given his estimate on folks in the building, he was almost certain the only ones left were his three primary targets.

He swept the rear of the building, and then checked the back door to make sure it was still jammed. When it wouldn't open, he felt assured no one had slipped out the back. He quickly made his way to the front of the building and locked the front entrance before walking to the closed door of the conference room. He heard several voices from within and looked down at his watch. It was six twenty-four. He had anticipated this moment for some time.

Bryce tripped the latch of the conference room door with his hand, pushed it open with his foot, and entered with both pistols ready. Nathan was seated to his left, Vijay was seated to his right, Edward was dead center, and the teleconference phone unit was active on the table.

“What the hell ...” Nathan began as he started to stand.

Bryce immediately fired his left pistol into Nathan’s right eye while he covered the other two with his right pistol. Nathan’s body fell backwards into the bookshelves, taking a number of books down with him. Vijay and Edward sat with their mouths open in total shock. Bryce turned right and focused his left pistol on Edward and right pistol on Vijay. He looked Vijay directly in the eye.

“I want the names of the hackers you hired for the Espozito deal,” Bryce said, training the pistol on his chest.

Vijay hesitated for a moment, looked at Edward, and then back at Bryce before responding.

“I’m not sure what you’re asking,” Vijay stuttered.

Bryce lowered the pistol and fired. The bullet exploded Vijay’s right knee, causing him to drop to the floor screaming in agony. Bryce gave him a minute to get it together.

“Wrong answer. You have plenty of joints I can shoot until we get this right. I want the names. Now!” Bryce yelled.

Vijay continued to writhe in pain, trying to focus long enough to make a statement.

“Last names, Singh and Davenport. Memory stick in my laptop bag,” Vijay managed to get out.

“Thank you,” Bryce said as he waited for Vijay to get into a good position for an eye shot. The blast from his right Sig-Sauer splattered the carpet behind Vijay with blood. His pain was over.

Bryce turned towards Edward and for both, motion seemed to slow. Their eyes locked on to each other, with Edward realizing he met this individual before from the sound of his voice, but had no clue to his identity. Bryce had trouble staring into Edward’s eyes. Their connection at the restaurant the other evening was too human for

Bryce, as Edward was not just a mere target to shoot after that point in time. He aimed the pistol at Edward's face.

"Please don't shoot. Please. I have a family. A wife and a son. I ..." Edward said calmly, trying to fight the massive fear that was overwhelming him.

Bryce lowered the pistol in his left hand towards Edward's chest and fired into his heart. Edward flew backward to the floor and went into a fetal position. He too felt blackness approaching, as his last thought was of how he should have taken the time to tell Donna he loved her earlier that morning.

Bryce lowered his pistol and turned his attention to the teleconference unit at the center of the table, its red LED still glowing. He could hear its open telephone line, but no one said a word.

"I hope you enjoyed your front row seat to the show," Bryce said as he hung up the line.

After a brief look at his damage, Bryce left the conference room, again with both pistols drawn just in case his human estimate was below its mark. His walk by the front offices stopped at Vijay's former residence. After closing the curtains, Bryce began rifling through his laptop bag. He found two memory sticks.

"I hope the bastard told the truth before he died. Maybe chalk up a few heaven points," Bryce said while tucking the sticks in a back pouch.

He finished his strike of the office by grabbing any memory stick or computer storage device that was within eye sight, and then was sure to do the same in the offices of the other owners. Edward's office stopped him briefly in his tracks when he noticed a framed photo of Melanie and Alex on Edward's bookshelf. Its display made the matter much more personal that he was use to and he hastened his exit from

the office.

It was six thirty-eight and Bryce was eager to be off the property before seven. An occasional phone would ring, reminding him that family would be calling to see when their loved ones would be coming home for dinner. In his estimate, either an outsider or police officer would arrive onsite before midnight to investigate.

His last task was to find the recorders for the few surveillance cameras posted around the building. They were typically located in the network room. Bryce didn't search long before finding a locked door near the center of the building. A reach near the bottom opening offered a soft flow of heat, giving him the assumption that electronic gear was on the opposite side. The lock was short work for one of his pistols and he entered to find his prize. He ejected all four running tapes and pouched them before cutting the camera input lines.

Bryce entered the office closest to the front door, killed the lights, and looked outside for a few minutes in search of any movement. All was clear. By six forty-eight, he was in the utility service van and on his way out of the business park. Its drop off lead to the pickup of his Suburban, and his arrival at the motel. He would take in a very short nap before leaving in the early morning hours for his yacht, anticipating his night's work being given rave reviews in the local and national news, and glowing in his twisted pride of professionalism.

Chapter 9

"Shit!" Daniel Carlington yelled and closed his eyes.

The alarm clock didn't really just display nine thirty six he thought to himself. He was almost afraid to look again, but he did.

"Nine thirty six. My ass is grass," he mumbled as he began to roll out of bed.

He knew he had no time for a shower, so after a quick change of clothes, a splash of water in his hair, and a swipe of his tooth brush in his mouth, Daniel dashed out of his apartment. He had the feeling Wednesday morning was not going treat him well at work today.

His pace through Dunkirk's' streets steadily increased, ending with an all out sprint to his place of employment. Walking was his mode of transportation, as drinking removed his mode of driving with a license. Luckily, work was only a few minutes from his apartment and New York's chilly morning temperature of sixty degrees kept him from becoming drenched in sweat.

Daniel arrived at Ordinance Disposal Technologies, Inc. just slightly past ten o'clock. After a brief security check-in at the main gate, he headed through the office area and grabbed his seat in the lab, hoping no one, especially his boss, would view his arrival. While he disliked work in general, his job as an engineering technician in the explosives world kept his interest. He was thankful that his stay in the United States military gave him the qualifications for such work. He unsuccessfully attempted to log into his computer several times, before a voice startled him from behind.

"Dan. Do you have a minute to step into my office?" Jerry Spires said.

Daniel turned and nodded before getting up from his seat and following his manager. While he looked at none of his co-workers on the way, he could feel their stares following his every step.

As they entered the room, Daniel noticed Diana Brinsberg settled into a chair next to Jerry's. She carefully held a folder with its tab in an opposite direction from his view. He assumed his personnel record would be living inside, as this was not the first meeting he took part in with his manager and human resources director.

"Have a seat, son," Jerry said as he closed the door behind him.

Jerry and Daniel sat. Daniel noticed the "I don't want to have to deal with this" look on Jerry's face, while Diana's said "You're a thorn in my side, and you're all mine now, buddy".

"Daniel, as your human resource director, I want to inform you that we're terminating your employment at Ordinance Disposal Technologies," Diana said in a direct, business like voice, with a pause that anticipated his painful reply, but he offered none at the moment. He knew his screw up count was one too many at that time.

"Given your numerous warnings for lateness, two warnings for being under the influence of alcohol on the job, and that you are currently included with two other employees who are under investigation for missing munitions, you really give us no choice. We've offered chemical dependency counseling as well, and you've turned it down," she said.

Daniel looked at Jerry. Jerry had been somewhat of a father figure to him over the past two years at the company, but Daniel realized that he over extended that relationship more than enough. With nothing but respect for Jerry, Daniel felt bad for putting him in this position.

"Do you have any thing to say before I proceed?" Diana queried,

as he felt her want him to show some sort of emotion.

He turned to look into her eyes and assembled his reply. He could handle her in a professional way, or he could get down and dirty, telling her what a bitch he thought she really was.

“No, I don’t. I brought this on myself and I look forward to wrapping this morning up so we can all move forward,” Daniel said in a steady tone.

Diana seemed surprised by his words before continuing her business of concluding his employment. She had him wrapped up and ready for a final departure by eleven thirty, with all necessary documents signed, and her last act being the acceptance of his surrendered employee badge. Daniel felt a sense of closure when he saw her place it in her desk drawer, like another segment of his life was being filed away.

Jerry helped him with his things and escorted him to the front gate.

“I wish you the best, son,” Jerry said, his voice bellowing from his round body.

“Jerry, I’m sorry for putting you through this crap and thanks for putting up with me,” Daniel replied.

“Call me if you need me.” Jerry said, handing him a box with his personal items.

Daniel turned and began his walk towards home. He anticipated his arrival there, as it meant he could drop off his things and visit his best friend ... the pub.

Wednesday morning began as a routine work day for Melanie that just kept getting busier and busier. Assembly issues on the production floor kept her running initially, and then vendor part issues killed another hour in the inspection area.

“I can’t understand this Mel,” the incoming inspector said, pointing at the specification control drawings.

“We give these guys documents that specify the outline dimensions of the oscillator, they sign off on it, then send the parts in with the wrong mounting pattern,” he continued.

“I hear your pain, Clarence. Why do you think I design most of my mounting brackets with slots in them instead of holes,” Melanie replied with a half smile and half frown.

“Mel, do you have a minute?” Alex said from behind.

“Hello Alex. Can I stop by your office in about twenty minutes or so? The morning’s been mad. I haven’t even had a chance to get back to my office since nine,” she said.

“Normally, I would say yes, but this is very important, Mel. Can you spare a few minutes?” Alex said, with his tone almost begging her time.

“Sure. Clarence, as usual, I’ll update the drawings to alter the mounting pattern. Can you contact the vendor and purchasing? We may need to generate revisions to either the specs or their pricing,” Melanie said as she backed away and turned towards Alex.

“What’s up?” she said to Alex in a light hearted tone.

“I think its best if we find a conference room,” Alex said as he began walking.

Melanie followed, with a whirlwind of thoughts going through her mind. Was it personal or business? Collin? She thought it better be some thing worthy and not a ploy on their personal life. They made it to the empty design conference room, grabbed a seat and closed the door.

“Mel, Donna called me a short while ago. She’s called your voice mail here and your cell phone a few times and when you hadn’t

replied, she contacted me," Alex started.

Melanie pictured Donna at home. She always had a good relationship with her sister-in-law, sometimes considering the in-law part should be removed.

"Is she OK?" Melanie asked.

"She's OK, well, not really. It's not that she's not OK, but ..."

"Alex, you're babbling. What's wrong with Donna?" Melanie interrupted.

Alex stopped talking and looked down at the table. He slowly raised his head as he finally let his emotions get the best of him.

"It's Ed, Mel. Your brother passed away," he said as a tear spilled past the limits of his eye, thinking of the many years they shared at family events, fishing trips, and on the golf course.

Melanie's jaw dropped. She looked at Alex in disbelief, wondering if the scene she was in was real as some thing took over her body … some thing she never felt before, almost impairing her focus.

"No. What? No, this can't be! What are you talking about?" she said as she began crying.

Sitting next to her, he turned towards her and put her head on his shoulder as she began to weep uncontrollably. She accepted his sincere gesture, briefly forgetting about the negativity between them. They stayed in that position for a minute or two before either spoke.

Alex began telling her Donna's understanding of what had happened last night at Recov. Throughout his recollection, Melanie's emotions went across the board, from sadness, to anger, to confusion, with all some times mixing so fast, she wasn't quite sure what she was feeling. He stayed with her for over twenty minutes before she requested some time to get it together by herself.

Melanie sat for what seemed to be an eternity, looking at the clock

on the wall. The pressure in her head made the second hand tick at an abnormal pace, while the beige, empty walls of the conference room seemed to echo noises she never heard before. She felt like her eyes were going to burst with tears when she picked up the phone and called Bryce.

For Bryce, Wednesday began five miles off the South Carolina coast in the Atlantic Ocean. After arriving at the Sabreline around two that morning, he powered the engines and left Myrtle Beach Yacht Club for more private and secure surroundings.

He awoke around nine thirty, patiently waited for the coffee to finish its brew, then grabbed a cup and went to the yacht's helm. Nature offered a peak setting, with plenty of sunshine, temperatures in the low seventies, a gentle breeze, and seas that rolled gently around his vessel. What a difference a day made, as water on all four sides gave him the sanctuary he needed to relax for a few days.

Bryce gave very little thought to Tuesday evening's events, almost detaching himself from their very existence, but he knew he had to catch up on news to make any necessary adjustments in his upcoming plans. Being in no rush, he took a half an hour to enjoy nature's trance before heading back to his ship's interior.

He gave a few minutes of attention to the ship's satellite system, and locked it in for local and national television programming. After bumping up the central air conditioning a notch and grabbing his laptop, he found a cozy position on the sectional couch in front of the big screen and began channel surfing. It didn't take long for him to hit his first digital target, and shortly there after, the record button.

"Karen Deiter reporting live from Conway, South Carolina for Channel Seven News, where we are covering the most horrific murder

scene in this small town's history. Last night, nine people were gunned down in and around the Recov Incorporated building, including two agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigations. While details are very sketchy at this time, and local and federal authorities are not saying much, we hope to bring you up to date throughout the day, including a scheduled news conference around three this afternoon."

A click to the next channel brought breaking news on one of the national news stations, again with very similar reports. Bryce surfed and enjoyed his unknown popularity, feeling like he was at the center of the world at that moment. His power felt intense, and was an inner source that drove him in tough times to achieve it again and again. The thrill of the kill was one thing, but the control over so many lives was another, grabbing their attention and gripping so many in sadness and fear.

Bryce fired up the laptop to surf the news sites as well. Again, the story he created was spun within the top three headlines every where. Feeling slightly overwhelmed, he was startled when his cell phone rang. He looked at the caller identification, realized it was Melanie, and hesitated an answer. He wondered if she knew about her brother yet, or how he should play it up if he were to take the call. Curiosity got the best of him, as he clicked the send button.

"Bryce? This is Melanie. Are you there?" Melanie's voice jumped out of its speaker as he raised the phone to his ear.

Bryce could sense her mood immediately, just from those six words. He began to feel the pain that was ripping her soul, and was not quite sure of the act he was about to partake in.

"Hello Mel. How are you?" he said.

"Oh my god. I'm glad you answered. I needed to talk to you."

“Slow down. You sound upset. What’s going on?” he said, slowly getting his game on.

“It’s my brother, Bryce. Edward. You met him the other night when we went out for wings. Have you seen any of the news?”

“No. I’m actually on the road right now for business. I have to head to Atlanta for a few days. Is he OK?”

“No he’s not. Oh my god! He’s dead Bryce. There was a mass murder at his office building last night in Conway. I can’t believe this is happening!” she said as she burst into tears.

Bryce tried his best to calm her over the next half hour, as his own emotions began to plummet from a euphoric state to human compassion. It was an area of his psyche he was not ready to step into.

“Bryce, I think his wife mentioned the funeral may be this Saturday. Would you be able to go with me?” Melanie said.

This one question stung his mind and caught him completely by surprise. While he typically detached quickly from his victims, he never even considered attending one of their funerals. He could almost feel a sense of guilt crawling on him as he began his reply.

“Mel, I have an important real estate meeting at Santerra on Saturday, but I’ll see what I can do. I want to be there for you,” he said, almost stumbling on his deceit.

“Thank you. I understand. What ever you can do. I understand,” she replied, as if off in another world.

The phone call ended shortly thereafter. Bryce turned off the television, shut down the laptop, and stared at the butt of one of the Sig-Sauers as it protruded from its holster near his gear bag. He got up and grabbed his weaponry to begin his ritual of cleaning, but this time, he felt like he was the one that needed the cleaning. It was a

dirty feeling he didn't like at all.

Daniel was almost into hour three of knocking back brews at Tito's Sports Bar, as he tried to drink his employment termination away. He wished his prior workouts of alcohol were less, as his built up tolerance prevented him from achieving his mental state. He was only starting to feel the influence of the draft beer.

"Bartender, I'll take a lemon drop shooter with that next beer," he said.

Instantly, he doubted his request and considered recanting, but his dependence on the spirits prevented him from saying a word.

Daniel looked around the bar, noticing a mix of the public, from white collar to blue collar, and from drunk to sober. He wondered what their stories were.

"Man, must have been a bunch of firings today," he said to himself.

He turned his attention back to the television that was perched in front of him behind the bar. The set continued to display a tennis tournament from England, of which he could care less about. Unfortunately, its controls were beyond his reach.

"Can we change the channel here?" he said to the bartender.

The bartender gestured "yes" and "one minute" from the other end of the bar. He stopped by with Daniel's beer and shooter, and then switched the channel to one containing national news.

"Hey buddy, is this seat taken?" a voice said to his right.

Daniel could almost smell the man before he turned to see him. He looked like he just left a job digging ditches, or some other grungy work. Judging from the guy's trouble in placing his fat ass on the stool, Daniel thought he may have been drinking while digging the ditches.

He laughed inside.

“What’cha drinkin’ there pal?” his new neighbor said.

“Beer and a lemon drop,” Daniel half said, hoping the man would lose interest in the art of conversation.

Daniel looked up at the television to see “News Conference” “Mass Murder in South Carolina” in bold type on the bottom of its display. It grabbed his attention for a second, as the Horry County sheriff was beginning to speak. His round cheeks, small wire frame glasses, and almost bald head reminded Daniel of his grandfather.

“Folks, this is a tragic day in our county. We’re looking at nine murders in our domain. At this point, we are considering them executions, as seven of the nine victims were shot in the same manner,” the sheriff began.

“Beer and what?” the drunk said.

“I’m sorry. Let me here this,” Daniel replied, while he stayed focused on the screen.

“Sheriff Moyer, in what way were they shot in the same manner?” a reporter from the crowd inquired.

The sheriff paused for a minute and considered whether he should answer the question, or wait.

“They were shot in the eye. The right eye,” the sheriff finished.

Daniel froze, as a tingling feeling on his back seemed to drive the alcohol from his body.

“What the hell’s a lemon drop?” his new friend said.

“Shut up asshole!” Daniel turned and hollered at him.

The bar crowd hushed some what to observe the shout and its consequences, only to see the drunk grab his beer and slowly dislodge himself from the stool for higher ground, mumbling all the way.

Daniel snapped his attention back to the television as the bartender walked up to catch the news as well.

“We’re just digging into the investigation folks. I’m sorry I don’t have more answers to your question, but I must assure you that both Horry County and the Federal Bureau of Investigations have a massive, cooperative team on this. We hope to bring the individuals who committed this terrible act to justice as soon as possible,” the sheriff concluded.

“Horry County? Where is that?” Daniel queried the bartender.

“I think that’s down in near Myrtle Beach. Been there a few times on vacation,” the bartender responded before leaving to check on Daniel’s former friend who just fell on the floor.

Daniel stared into his untouched lemon drop shooter without blinking for quite some time. He began to see visuals of his father’s execution, repeatedly seeing that slow bullet traveling towards his eye. He began shaking as both anger and purpose tried to take over his body. Daniel took a last look at his untouched drinks, thinking they would stay untouched for quite some time, whether at this location or at another. He had to do some thing.

“Bartender! Ring up my tab. I have to go,” Daniel said while slapping cash on the bar.

As he walked through the exit of Tito’s, he reached for his cell phone. He looked at his former fiancé’s work number several times before committing to call her. Once he pressed the button, he knew there was no turning back.

“Hello,” he heard Jill’s voice answer.

“Jill. This is Daniel. I’ll be brief and never bother you again. I just wanted to let you know that I’m leaving Dunkirk. I may not be back. I love you. I’m heading to South Carolina,” Daniel said quickly, not

waiting for her reply, and hanging up shortly after delivering his message. He picked up his pace to his apartment.

Chapter 10

By Thursday afternoon, the halls of Recov echoed an eerie silence, as the crime scene investigation had concluded. The bodies were gone, but the numbered evidence markers and blood still populated various areas, awaiting their retrieval by the police contracted cleaning crew. The only internal activity to the building was taking place in the production conference room, as local law enforcement and federal agents were wrapping up a final report on the scene and planning their next moves. Being untouched by the chaos from Tuesday night, this particular conference room was their selected staging post.

“Last item. Although the surveillance tapes have been removed from this building, I want all footage from area security cameras reviewed,” Thomas Farrell said.

Agent Farrell was the lead FBI investigator assigned to the case. His wide, chiseled face, and graying black hair and mustache gave him the look of a man who spent a fair amount of his life in the military, but it was not part of his history. Instead, he opted for the educational route into law enforcement. After completing his bachelor’s degree in criminal justice through the University of Cincinnati, he joined the Cleveland Police Department. With five years under his belt as a patrol officer, he moved on to the bureau. Given his appearance, his forty five years had treated him well.

“Well, gentleman. That concludes this meeting. Every one in this room has a number of action items they need to follow up on. I’m expecting forensics to make this a high priority on their list. Let’s get together for a two o’clock teleconference tomorrow afternoon. And, I

want all jurisdictions cooperating on this one. We need to work as a tight knit team, sharing any info we can. OK, catch you on Friday," Farrell concluded.

The officers and agents slowly departed, with numerous discussions about the case erupting while they were exiting the conference room door. Only Agent Farrell and Sheriff Moyer were left. Farrell closed the door.

"We have to catch these bastards, Tom," Sheriff Moyer started.

"Bastards? Do you think this massacre was caused by a number of individuals?" Agent Farrell replied.

"That's my guess. I mean, it had to take a number of loonies to wipe out a whole company like this."

Agent Farrell sat across the conference room table from Moyer and smiled.

"Dave, up to this point, I haven't discussed my beliefs of who committed this crime. I wanted to get an unbiased investigation going just in case my hunch was wrong, or in case we have a copy cat group going instead of the real killer, as in singular," Farrell said.

"You mean to tell me you think one killer did this, not multiples?"

"I'm ninety percent positive it was one. I hate to tell you this Dave, but your jurisdiction has been hit by one of the most dangerous, and elusive assassins I know. I should know. You see, I've been investigating his history for almost fifteen years, and I don't think I'm any closer to catching him today as I was back then. This guy, in my opinion, just does not make a mistake. Every thing is planned out to the nth degree. He blends into his setting like a chameleon, then fades away like a ghost."

"Well what's your game plan for this round? You see, we're in peak vacation season in Horry County, and I know the Mayor is gonna be

crawling up my ass real soon," Moyer said, with frustration bubbling in his voice.

"He's going to screw up soon. He's got to screw up. No one can continue a perfect run forever," Farrell said.

"Well if he's smart, he's probably long gone by now," Moyer said.

"I don't think that's true, Tom. I've seen evidence in the past that suggests he stays in the area for a while. Doesn't want to let a hasty departure cause any suspicion. And besides, he's going to kill again real soon," Farrell stated confidently.

"What? How can you be so sure?" Moyer queried, sitting up in his seat.

"Because there are still people alive out there that really pissed some one off. You see, we've been monitoring Recov for over a month now. They jumped into the money laundering business when their market in asset recovery went south. They got in bed with a gentleman by the name of Frank Espozito, and Espozito has mob connections. We had been monitoring him for a little over three months, and his business with Recov made us put them under our wing as well," Farrell said.

"Well why would Espozito want these guys dead?"

"Simple. One of the Recov guys got the bright idea that they would hire a couple of hackers to steal Espozito's money without initially telling the other partners. That was Vijay ... the Indian gentleman with the popped right eye and missing knee cap. He assumed Espozito would put the blame on the hackers and not on Recov. I think he had a little more to learn about doing business with the mob. Espozito's no dummy, so I'm assuming he put the hit out on Recov after they came up with the story regarding his missing fifteen million dollars. Even though Recov eventually returned the funds after a great recovery

effort on their part, the damage was done. Any way, we can tie Espozito into the money laundering charges, and he has a possible motive for the murders here, but I have no way of tying him to it all. I don't want to bring him in until we can nail him for every thing"

"Well back to our killer here. You're implying he's going to target these hackers next?"

"Exactly."

"Well why don't we stake them out and wait for our boy to show," Moyer asked.

"Perfect plan, but the problem is Dave, I don't have a clue to their identities."

Chapter 11

The large windows that encompassed the bright walls of the church offered stunning views of the surrounding grassy hills, a never ending picket fence, and a beautiful sunny sky. Daniel felt guilty as he found pleasure in the scenery his Saturday setting had to offer given the sad circumstances that brought him there. It was the day that Edward Robell was to be laid to rest.

Daniel arrived in South Carolina just a day before with nothing more than his car, clothing, and the trust fund his father's former company left him. His trip was quite nerve racking, concerned that his driving on a suspended license would conclude his adventure with incarceration. In his mind, Daniel was trying to move beyond that segment of his life and gave his own justification for the fictitious reinstatement of his driving privileges. After taking residence at a motel in Conway, his perusal of the local papers revealed plenty of names of the Recov deceased. He then turned his attention to the obituaries. They offered up his next step, as they provided funeral locations where he may be able to meet family members and discuss their opinions of the murders. He hoped their discussion would offer direction to his mission of finding his father's killer.

The memorial service he selected set him on a three hour drive from Conway to Ladson, a community that was located one hundred and twenty five miles south west of Conway. The core families of Edward and Melanie were life long parishioners at the Ladson United Methodist Church, with almost all deceased members being laid to rest in nearby Cherry Hill Cemetery. It would be Edward's final resting place as well.

Daniel's early arrival at the church beat most of the guests that morning. Ignoring the closed sign that was strung across the entrance to the balcony, he made his way up the stairs. It was an inconspicuous location where he could take notes and make observations without causing any attention to himself.

Prior to the service's beginning, he carefully reviewed the family members and their seating positions near the casket at the front of the main isle. Given their deep emotional state as displayed by the flow of tears, Daniel assumed he saw the "survived by beloved wife" Donna, and "son" Kyle. He initially thought of approaching Kyle, but realized today would not be a good day.

A middle aged man and woman, and a man and woman Daniel thought to be of his age caught his eye as they slowly walked to the front of the hall and took a seat next to the assumed wife. The man offered a comforting arm around his female companion, while Daniel then locked his eye on the younger couple. He would not know there relationship to the deceased until Melanie, the "loving sister", got up half way through the service to give her tearful eulogy to the gathering. She finished, then took her seat and placed her head on the man's upper arm. Her shoulders moved up and down rapidly, as her crying got heavier. Daniel assumed the man was "brother-in-law and long time friend" Alex. He appreciated the local paper's lengthy obituary, as it greatly helped his personal investigation.

After the service concluded, every one joined the funeral procession to Cherry Hill Cemetery. Located off of College Park Road on Market Road, Cherry Hill was thought to exist before every one's time, and was in some what of a forgotten state. Many of the headstones had been stolen throughout its history, and some were more recently destroyed during Hurricane Hugo. Their replacement

was forgotten since most families had been long gone.

At the conclusion of the grave site service, Daniel kept an eye on the younger couple he spotted earlier in the church. They stood by Melanie and Alex as their elders began a brief conversation. Daniel waited patiently. He had plenty of time.

“Alex, I just want to thank you for your support. I really appreciate it right now,” Melanie said to Alex, initially looking down to the ground for strength, then turning up to his eyes.

“No problem at all, Mel. Ed was like a brother to me as well. I had to be here,” he replied, placing his hands on the sides of her shoulders.

Alex gently pulled Melanie towards him an offered a comforting hug. At that moment, she felt temporarily at peace with him and gladly accepted his sincere offer. Collin smiled, thinking of happier times when they were a family. He wished it would be that way again some day.

“I have to run, but I’ll see you all at Donna’s house later,” Alex said as his hug with Melanie ended.

Alex departed, and then Collin decided it was an opportune time to ask a planned question.

“Mom, did you invite Bryce?” he said, allowing his immaturity to deliver just a little too early.

Melanie gathered strength before volleying his confrontation.

“I did, Collin,” she replied.

“Where is he?” Collin continued.

“Collin, this is not the time,” Kimberley interjected.

“It’s OK Kim, but thanks though,” Melanie said with a smile to her before turning her attention back to Collin.

“I invited him but he said he had an important meeting at Santerra

Realty today. He's trying to close a deal on a golf resort. Besides Collin, we've only gone out a few times."

"I just thought if he cared enough, he would be here. Dad was," Collin said.

"Collin," Kimberley said as she grabbed his arm. All were silent for a moment.

"I'm going to ride with Aunt Donna. I hope to see you both at her house," Melanie said before turning away.

As she walked to her sister-in-law and nephew, Melanie thought of both Alex and Bryce, and her decisions that took her to this exact stage of her life. She wondered where Bryce's lack of presence left their relationship. Her thoughts faded as Nancy Myers came up for a departing hug.

"I'll catch up with you on Monday. OK?" Nancy asked.

"OK. Thanks for coming by Nance," Melanie said as Nancy began to walk away backwards.

Although Nancy was fighting to choke back the tears for her friend, her support felt so strong to Melanie. As Melanie neared Donna and Kyle, she knew it was time to be solid for them.

"Collin, you're being a dick," Kimberley started. "Your mother's brother dies, you know, your uncle! And you bring this up now."

Collin wasn't quite sure what to say. He felt his guilt jabbing him, but he was too insecure to admit it.

"Hello folks. Do you have a minute?" Daniel said as he approached the couple in their awkward moment. Both welcomed his distraction.

"My name is Daniel Carlington. Are you Collin Peterson, nephew of Mr. Robell?

"I am. How are we related through the Robells?" Collin replied.

”Well let’s just say we’re not related through family, but through incident. Would you have a minute to grab a seat?“ Daniel said, pointing to an outdoor table off to the left.

The trio sat down at the table underneath the shade of a large oak tree. During the next fifteen minutes, Daniel further introduced himself and brought his connection to Collin to light. Both Daniel and Kimberley learned that Collin’s relationship with his uncle was close up to his early teen years, but dissipated beyond that point due to their schedules becoming busier. In wrapping up, the guys seemed to feel that twenty some thing bond Daniel was hoping for, while Kimberley tried to remain her usual skeptical self.

”Well Daniel, Collin, it was great getting a chance to talk to you,“ Daniel said, looking down at his watch, thinking he may have time to make it to another funeral. ”Here’s my cell. If you have some time, maybe you could show me around Myrtle Beach. It’s all new to me and a far cry from Dunkirk.“

”That sounds good. I’ll give you a ring,“ Collin said.

Daniel made his departure. The couple waited until he was beyond ear shot before they began sharing their summation.

”Well, what do you think?“ Collin began.

”I don’t know, Collin. I understand his need to be this big hero and track down the guy involved in his dad’s death, but if this right eye thing is true, this guy has killed a ton of people. We can’t do much. That’s what the FBI is for,“ she said.

”I know. I’m with you. But we could at least show him a little Southern Carolina hospitality. Maybe get him to a few of the local attractions. Sounds like he’s had a rough go of it lately,“ Daniel replied.

The light breeze of the August day came to an end, as the heat

and humidity seemed to enrobe their bodies. With all the funeral goers gone, they sat for a moment in silence, as they watched the coffin of Collin's uncle being lowered into the ground. Kimberley wondered how many other families were going through this same scenario right now because of Tuesday night's tragedy, while Collin put himself in the place of Kyle and his massive loss, making him appreciate his life just a little more.

As Bryce finished prepping the Sabreline to depart from its spot in the Atlantic Ocean, he sat on the bow to catch the sunset as it crested on the awaiting shore. With Sunday evening's arrival, he had finished his hiatus from society and was ready to get back to land for a lengthy jog. The change in the air temperature caught him off guard as the sun faded from view.

Returning to the controls of the bridge, he fired up the vessel's engines for a warm up cycle, then energized the running lights. He grabbed his cell phone, flipped to its display, only to notice his two calls to Melanie between Saturday and Sunday went unreturned.

"Damn."

The trip back in was slow, but he enjoyed its hypnotic ride. His mind wandered in his travels. With the past days' news stories regarding Recov diminishing, and no new evidence to report, he shifted over to thoughts of Melanie and wondering if the feeling of closeness he received from her was valid, or one of his misconceptions. Real or not, he enjoyed it, as it diminished his typical loner status. Right now, he only hoped his missing her brother's funeral did not do too much damage to their relationship.

And then there were the visions of Edward Robell, from the night at the wing place, to him begging for his life at Recov. The overheard

surveillance conversations of Edward replayed in Bryce's mind as well. He thought of how Edward really was the good guy in this whole Espozito thing, taking the hit for Vijay's mistake. Bryce also considered Edward's calls to his wife, and their discussions of his son Kyle who was now fatherless.

"This is not supposed to be happening!" Bryce said, scared by the feeling of being human instead of the typical monster that kills and forgets.

Sheriff Moyer sat behind his desk and gazed across the Recov paperwork. Sitting just behind the compilation, framed photos of his grandchildren occupied there usual real estate on the edge of his desk. To the left, he noticed the corner of the autopsy report of Pam Daugherty leaning against the image of his youngest granddaughter, Lacey. He moved the report away, thinking of how close this tainted world was getting to the innocent world he was sworn to protect. After doing so, he realized how crazy he was for that simple action, but it was all he could do at the time, as the trail of clues was going from lukewarm to slightly cold. He was startled out of the daze by the ringing phone on his desk.

"Hello. Sheriff Moyer," he said as he received the call, and then paused.

"Ah. Agent Farrell. Tell me some thing good."

"No shit! Sure, send the suspect's description to my email address," Moyer's voice perked as he reached for a pen and paper to capture additional details.

"Where did this come from?" and another long pause.

"Security camera at Conway Utility Service? I see. So you're thinking this is when he ditched the service van afterwards?" he said

as he continued scribbling.

”Computer interpolation through the disguise. Whatever that means. I’ll keep an eye out for your email.“

”I understand. We’ll keep this within our group so this bastard doesn’t run if it were to hit the local news,“ he finished with a hang up of the telephone.

”I’ll be damned. Whoops!“ he said as he turned towards another grandchild’s photo. ”I know Freddy, that was a whole bunch of cuss words. I’ll put some money in the swear jar, but this is big!“ Sheriff Moyer said as he hopped up to request dispatch to setup an emergency meeting with his officers. ”This is real big.“

Chapter 12

"I mean, I had most of last week off, but I just didn't feel like coming in today, Nance," Melanie said.

"It's understandable Mel. You had one hell of a week and you needed time off. You can't expect to just jump right in again," Nancy responded.

Monday afternoon at lunch brought the two friends together at a Signitell picnic table just outside the cafeteria.

"Well on to a more positive topic before we have to go inside. How are things with Bryce?" Nancy said.

"Not very positive," Melanie replied, looking down at her half eaten lunch. "Or at least at the moment."

"I didn't see him at the funeral, and I didn't want to ask. What happened, Mel?"

"He said he had an important meeting at Santerra Realty on this golf resort thing, and that he was going to try to break it. I never heard from him."

They sat quietly for a moment or two.

"Well, it's still early for you guys."

"I know. But I needed him there, Nancy. I hate to admit it, but I felt closer to Alex on Saturday," Melanie said.

"Let's not go there, Mel. We've been down this road before. Stay strong."

"Any way, Bryce called a few times over the weekend, but I didn't feel up to returning the calls."

"Give him a call. Doesn't help to hold a grudge," Nancy said as she began packing up the remainder of her lunch. "Besides, talking is

cheap therapy.”

*****

To: cathy@aerolink1020.net
From: jco@comsat721.com
Subject: Dutch Treat?

Cathy,

Any chance you could meet me for dinner? Say in front of the Key West Grill at Broadway at the Beach? Nine o’clock on Wednesday evening? If you don’t mind, you could pickup half the tab. I hear their South Carolina gumbo is to die for, probably the best in the US.

I’ll take care of dessert later.

Jacob

*****

Bryce scanned his message to ensure his usual three comments were included in his email to the Org. In addition, the word “tab” always set the stage for a monetary payment for services rendered. “Dessert” would be the retirement of the last targets. A click of the send key sealed his payment request for milestone one, and began his message’s bounce with servers around the world.

Waiting for a reply seemed to take forever. Bryce pondered the cash transaction he was requesting. His paranoia of electronic

transfer, whether conversation or money, made him always ask for cash. It left no trail like a transfer of funds into an account, especially when it was time to make a withdrawal from that account. The only problem with cash was getting past that initial transaction with the Org, as it could mean his demise instead.

Finally, his wait was over as the reply to his email was received. It confirmed his requested date, and initiated his reply.

*****

To: cathy@aerolink1020.net
From: jco@comsat721.com
Subject: Re:Re:Dutch Treat?

Cathy,

Thank you for your reply. I look forward to our date.

Can you bring my items in your black back pack? I can't believe I left them at your "humble abode".

Jacob

*****

He followed the sending of that email with an emailed image of the exact back pack they were to use. Bryce then went into action on the protection team setup, as he knew he had little time. He was stopped by the ring of his cell phone. Its display showed an incoming call from

Melanie.

“Hello.”

“Hi Bryce. This is Melanie. How are you?”

“Hello Mel. I’m fine, but more importantly, how are you?”

“I guess the best I can be considering the circumstances. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to return your calls this weekend.”

“It’s understandable.”

“I was hoping to see you at my brother’s funeral.”

“I’m sorry Mel, I tried to get out of the meeting, but it was too big in moving towards a close on the deal.”

“I understand.”

“Can we get together this week? I’d like to catch up with you. I’ve been thinking about you, and about your brother” Bryce said.

“I’d like to, but I think I’m going to take it easy this week.”

They paused before either spoke.

“No problem at all. Please call me if you just want to talk, or change your mind on a get together. OK?” Bryce said.

“Sure.”

“Mel, I’m sorry for not being there. I ...” Bryce added as he felt they were near the conversation’s end.

“I understand. I have to go. I’m at work. I’ll try to catch up with you next week,” she said before they ended the call shortly thereafter.

“I think she’s a little pissed,” Bryce said, as he gave the situation some thought before continuing his course of action with the protection team.

Bryce arrived at Broadway at the Beach around eight thirty Wednesday evening. He recalled his last visit to the Myrtle Beach attraction with Melanie, and how the atmosphere that night was on the

opposite end of the spectrum from what he was currently experiencing. Even the weather seemed to set the mood, as overcast skies from recent showers kept the crowds to a minimum. This was not a situation that Bryce cared for, as a smaller crowd would help him blend less easily during his exit with the payment. Stepping from the Suburban, he assumed an act that matched his disguise as an obese tourist in his forties. Bryce lumbered around the general area for a little bit of surveillance, being certain to not near the meeting point, and then made his way to the large restrooms on the outskirts of the attraction. He entered, moved into a stall, and began the wait for his delivery. He could hear others occupying surrounding stalls as well. Three clicks from his mouth were answered by two from his neighbors. The protection team was in place.

As the big hand of the outdoor clock in the central square rose toward twelve, the chime started its signaling of nine o'clock. The female Org member cautiously continued her stance in front of Key West Grill. Her slow pace back and forth could either be viewed as a nervous young lady anticipating her date's arrival, or to the trained eye, a woman who was fighting her fear from being selected by the Org for the task at hand. She was new to their group, and her lack of recent accomplishments made her wonder if they viewed her as an easy sacrifice for the incoming lion. She felt all alone as the voices in her supposed music player headphones went silent, allowing her to concentrate more on the weight her black backpack presented.

As the clock struck its ninth chime, a member of Bryce's protection team made his way to the young woman. He stopped directly in front of her and halted her pacing. Her jaw dropped slightly, as her eyes locked on his.

"Humble abode," he said to her directly and strongly.

She hesitated for a moment, almost losing her train of thought, before removing the pack from her back and handing it to him. He assumed the pack and placed one strap over his shoulder, turned, and abruptly walked away. The female Org member was frozen in her position, until a voice in her headphones told her to exit quickly.

The protection team member kept up his quick pace to the restroom where Bryce was stationed. He entered, waited for a normal patron to leave, locked the door from inside, and clicked his mouth twice. Five stall doors opened just about simultaneously, as Bryce assumed possession of the back pack and went back into his stall. He swept the pack for tracking devices, carefully opened it, and methodically placed each bundle of money into the stomach cavity his disguise contained. In each passing minute, he could hear a protection member leave the restroom, with a matching pack on their back. They would total five decoys in all, including the original courier.

Bryce waited patiently in the stall. He looked down at his watch's display of nine twenty-three. Given his assumption that the decoys should have any tracker beyond his immediate area, he made the decision that it was time to move.

He exited the restroom and lumbered down a sidewalk that was adjacent to the massive parking lot that surrounded Broadway at the Beach. Nightfall was in full swing, with very little light and no people in his immediate area. It would be about a ten minute walk to his vehicle given the pace of his act.

"Jacob?" a voice called from behind him.

In a flash, Bryce spun around, withdrew a pistol from his back, and faced a young woman. He grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her into a walkway between a dumpster and the side of a building, out of sight from any inquiring eye. She made no noise until he put the gun

up to the side of her head. He pondered who it was that knew his original first name from so many years ago, with so many identity switches in between.

“Please don’t shoot! If you’re Jacob, I’m your daughter,” the young woman pleaded in a tearful voice.

Bryce paused for a moment to try to make heads or tails of the situation. A swift glance to the side again revealed no one within their immediate vicinity. He moved his grip from her shoulder to the side of her neck, pressing the pistol’s silencer into her temple.

“I’m the Cathy from Riverwatch. Why didn’t you call me?” she continued, as her voice became more pleading

“Oh my god. Please don’t shoot me. You have to believe me. My mother was Alma from the Org.”

Bryce gradually loosened his grip from her neck, then inched the pistol from her temple, as the names began ticking away in his head. It began to add up, but the whole situation caught him so off guard, confusion still prevailed.

“How the hell do you know who I am?” he said.

“I’m trained in tracking. You were the next one to leave the restroom without a back pack. I only assumed. The Org doesn’t know I’m here. I wanted to talk to you!” she said while trying to control the volume of her voice.

Bryce removed his hand from her neck and backed up a step, but was sure to keep the pistol pointed at her chest.

“I slipped you the piece of paper with my number on it at Riverwatch. Why didn’t you call me?”

“I lost the paper. I really didn’t think any thing of it,” Bryce replied. “I don’t have time for this!” Bryce said as he began losing his patience with her.

The young woman lowered her head and began sobbing gently. Bryce checked the side view again.

“Can I give you my number again? I need to know you. I need to know you!” she said.

“OK. Then you have to leave. Understood? If you’re going to reach, you need to reach slowly. Understood?”

The young woman nodded, and then retrieved a piece of paper from her pocket. She passed it to him.

“We’re going to leave together. You’re going to turn right. I’m going to turn left. You’re not to turn around. No matter what! Understood?” Bryce continued.

She nodded, then turned from him and walked forward. Bryce followed until they split in different directions. He watched as she was careful not to turn. She slowly disappeared behind the curvature of the adjacent building.

Paranoia jumped all over his body, but he finally made it back to his vehicle. It would be a long night of “out of the way” driving until he was assured no one was following.

As Bryce waited for his laptop to boot, he slowly flipped the piece of paper given to him by Cathy with his left hand. Bent at a ninety degree angle at its center, he rotated it from edge to edge, again and again. He visualized her frame, face, and tears as they rolled down her cheeks last night. Views of her from Riverwatch teased his mind, as he considered her claim.

With the computer through its startup sequence, he turned his attention to the two memory sticks he retrieved from Vijay’s laptop bag the night of the termination. Bryce secured the first to a port in his laptop and began searches for the names the one knee capped target

mentioned. “Singh” came up empty, followed by a nil for “Davenport”. He swapped the first with the second stick and repeated his search.

“Bingo. We have names. Now do we have any thing of use,” he said as he sat back from the table of the Sabreline.

He took a slow sip of his coffee before pecking at the keys again. It was not long before he found document files that contained each hacker’s contact info. Bryce noted their home addresses as being within the state, and his map search on the Internet revealed just over an hours drive between them.

After an extended run in the late afternoon, he grabbed a quick bite before settling down for some shut eye. It would be a long night, as Bryce planned to pay a visit to the homes of the hackers. Darkness would provide the cover he needed to install a wiretap transmitter on their home phone lines.

Approximately twenty minutes from the Sabreline, and nearly thirty minutes from Travis Davenport’s home, his curiosity finally got the best of him. Given the security of being mobile, he decided to place a cell call. It was answered on the third ring.

“Hi. This Cathy.”

“Hello Cathy. This is Jacob. Before we go any further, what was your mother’s favorite color?”

Cathy paused. Bryce could hear her begin to choke up on the other end.

“She didn’t actually have a favorite color,” Cathy started and then paused again. “It was more a color combination. Yellow and purple. Like the dress I wore for you at Riverwatch. The colors always reminded her of Spring.”

Bryce could feel a lump in his throat, as he visualized Alma working in her garden. She would plant her tulip bulbs in the Fall, with

the Spring showing only those two colors. It was always beautiful.

Chapter 13

Late Saturday morning brought Bryce to a parking lot across the street from his intended destination. Peering through binoculars, he kept a keen eye on Jersey Mike's sub shop located just beyond Forty-First Avenue South in Myrtle Beach. With lunch time approaching, the location was bustling with hungry beach goers. The air conditioner of the Suburban was in full force, helping to break the heavy heat of the mid-August sun. Unfortunately, this type of weather offered him little opportunity to hide his fire power under clothing. Only a small pistol strapped to his ankle beneath his long khaki pants would provide the security he needed.

Five minutes before their planned meeting time, Bryce noticed a tall woman with light brown hair and an athletic frame approach the door of the sub shop. As previously instructed, she moved in front of the main window and stood for exactly three minutes before entering. The windows on the adjacent side of the building displayed her as she selected a particular seat, again per his prior instructions. During the young woman's entrance, Bryce noticed no strange sightings or unusual electronic chatter in the area, but he was still unsure if she had hidden company.

As his vehicle's digital clock switched to a display of eleven thirty, he took a deep breath, exited, and made his way to the shop. After making his entrance to Jersey Mike's, Bryce assumed the seat directly across from his prior target. It backed to the corner of two brick walls, with a full view of the sole entrance.

"Hello Cathy," Bryce said, as he looked into her deep brown eyes. They began to swell as she fought emotions that tried to overcome

her.

“Thank you for meeting me, Jacob,” she replied with a smile that warped back and forth under her lack of composure. She did her best to remain calm.

Bryce finished a visual sweep of the area, and then reached for a small signal detector in his pocket. He turned it on and sat it beside his leg on the seat. In only his view, its display showed no signal transmission, giving indication that their conversation was not being sent to another location.

“It’s my pleasure. Would you mind telling me what you can?” Bryce said.

Cathy sat up straight in her seat, and focused on slowing her breathing before beginning.

“You were in a relationship with Alma May for a number of years?” she said.

“Correct. Just over three,” Bryce said.

“And the relationship ended when she went to Europe.”

“Yes. We were both in the Org at that time. She told me she was being deployed for a two month mission, but the Org reported her as being killed approximately two weeks in,” Bryce said.

“Well, she was killed, but not two weeks in. It was actually four years,” Cathy said, watching Bryce’s mouth open behind his surprised look.

“What?” he said.

“It was actually four years, Jacob. You see, from what I gathered, a routine physical showed Alma was pregnant with me before she knew. Given the relationship between two of their better agents, this was not in the best interest of the Org, so they shipped her to Europe, reported her death to you, and then made sure you were totally

unavailable for contact to her," Cathy said.

"But what happened to her beyond her supposed death?" Bryce queried.

"She began raising me, but Jacob, her hatred for the control the Org had placed on her life far outweighed her loyalty. They sensed that, and she really loved you," she said as her eyes pooled again. "They terminated her," Cathy continued, as tears exited her eyes.

Bryce could feel his back tense as anger started through his spine. He clenched his fists and locked in on the imitation wood grain of the table.

"They terminated her, Jacob, and then they brought me into their mess. I snooped for years before I realized how you were related to me. I wanted to know you, and I waited time and time again to get on the "Cathy" meeting detail. It's weird that they used your daughter's real name in all those scenarios. Kind of twisted," Cathy continued. "I finally got to meet you at River Watch, but now I'm scared to death, Jacob."

"Of me?" Bryce asked.

"No. Of the Org. They terminated my mother, and I have the feeling if you run beyond the missions they have planned for you, and they terminate you, they'll do the same to me to clean the slate. I've seen them wipe out entire families," she said.

Bryce's mind raced with Cathy's statements. He checked the signal detector and surveyed the shop before continuing the discussion. The coast was still clear.

"What are you asking of me?" Bryce said.

"If you go into hiding, I want you to take me with you. You know how to disappear from their radar. I don't. Besides, you're the only parent I have left now, and I need to know you, Jacob. That is so

strong to me," Cathy said as she moved her hand toward him across the table.

He hesitated before finally completing a connection with her soft skin.

"I hate these bastards. And how they've controlled my life as well, but I'm not sure I'm committed to running yet, Cathy," Bryce said.

"Well if you do, you have to promise me you'll take me with you, Jacob. Please," Cathy said as she almost burst into tears, drawing looks from nearby patrons.

"I'll do what I can Cathy. I have your number and you have mine. I want to know you more too. Hell, how old are you?" Bryce asked.

"Twenty-one. I'll be twenty-two in January," she replied.

"Well they stole those years from me, but I don't want them to get any more. I need to finish my current assignment before we contact each other again though. It will be safer to make up lost time then," Bryce said.

"I understand," Cathy said with a smile.

They would talk for another ten minutes about their lives before departing Jersey Mike's that early afternoon. Bryce's walk to his Suburban was interrupted by a call from Melanie. It was very welcomed, as they had not talked for almost a week.

Barefoot Landing brought a good diversion to Bryce, as Melanie's earlier phone call lead to a last minute, unexpected date for his Saturday evening. Similar to Broadway at the Beach, Barefoot Landing surrounded a lake, with outlet shops on one side, boardwalk shops on the other, and connecting piers between. Melanie and Bryce strolled one of the piers, and stopped for the view of the setting sun. Unfortunately, their enjoyment of the view was some what dampened

by the distance they felt. Both were unsure of where exactly their relationship stood after the funeral of Melanie's brother. While she knew she wanted to see him that weekend, Melanie decided she would just have to let things take their course. Her distance made Bryce want her more.

"Mel, like I said. I'm sorry about the funeral," Bryce turned and started.

"Shhh. Let's just enjoy the day's end. Then you can take me shopping and try to make up for it," she said with a giggle, not returning his glance.

Bryce smiled for a second before returning back to the last drop of day as it retreated behind the trees. The ice was starting to break, but he knew he had some more chipping to do.

Walking by the boardwalk shops, another member of Melanie's clan was introducing a new acquaintance to the Myrtle Beach attraction. Collin and Kimberley were on their second outing with Daniel Carlington, with the first being a tour of the southern beach areas.

"So what is on the other side of the lake?" Daniel said.

"Plenty of outlet shops. Oh, and my favorite, reasonably priced shoe store," Kimberley said as she turned to Collin's smirk. Shopping with her was not one of his favorite pass times.

"I think we've killed this half. How about we see what we can do with the second?" Daniel said.

They began their walk on the connecting pier, when Kimberley noticed Melanie walking in their direction.

"Hey Mel!" she called out, drawing the parties into one group.

"Hello all," Melanie said, noticing Collin's unfavorable glance towards Bryce.

“Bryce, you’ve met my son Collin. This is his girlfriend Kimberley. And ...” Melanie paused as she awaited her queue for an introduction to Daniel to be answered.

“Oh. This is Daniel. He’s new to the area so we’re showing him around,” Kimberley said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Bryce said as he turned towards Kimberley and Daniel, followed by their nods.

Daniel locked onto his voice, wondering why it sounded familiar. He just couldn’t place their connection.

Bryce turned his attention to Collin, realizing he had ground to make up with him.

“Collin, I’m very sorry to hear about your Uncle. Your mother told me you were close,” Bryce said.

Collin let some of his chill depart before responding, acknowledging Bryce’s attempt at moving towards a truce.

“Thank you. We were, or more so when I was younger. He was a great man,” Collin said.

“That’s what your mom said. And I’m sure he had many great things left to accomplish. As I’ve said in the past, every man has a journey through life. Some journeys are just cut shorter than others. It’s a shame ...” Bryce said.

Daniel locked on Bryce’s eyes as they were turned toward Collin. He could feel his heart beat in his throat, and move to his head as the pressure got more intense. Tunnel vision set in, as the sound of the discussion disappeared and was replaced with a loud tone coming from within his skull. He pieced the voice and saying together, thinking of how their combination haunted his mind for years prior. Daniel slowly turned from the group and stared across the water.

“Daniel. Are you OK?” Kimberley said, turning her attention from

the ongoing conversation.

Daniel rested his lower abdomen against the railing of the pier.

“I think I am. I’m not sure if dinner is settling well with me right now,” he answered before turning to take another look at Bryce. Their eyes met for a brief instant, causing Daniel to turn back to the water.

After the conversation wrapped up and both parties began their departure from the group, Collin, Kimberley, and Daniel stopped again after walking twenty feet.

“Daniel. What’s got ya? You look like you’ve seen a ghost” Collin said.

Daniel thought more like he saw some one who created a ghost ... his father’s. He decided it was not in his best interest to bring up his viewpoint with them before mulling his feelings a little more, as certainty was not present on his part at that time.

“I’m just feeling sick to my stomach. Not sure about those oysters I had for dinner,” he said as he sat on the nearby bench. “I think I may head back to the hotel and stretch out for a while.”

“Vibrio vulnificus,” Kimberley said.

“Vibri what?” Colin asked.

“Vibrio vulnificus,” Kimberley said. “It’s a bacteria found in oysters that can upset a person’s stomach.”

“Helps to date a nurse, Dan,” Collin said.

“Thanks. I’ll be fine guys. Just give me a minute here and then I’ll head back to my car. Sorry for cutting the night short,” Daniel said.

“No problem, Dan. We’ll walk you back. Get yourself together because you and I are going rock climbing tomorrow. You made a commitment. No backing out because of a bad mollusk or two,” Collin said.

to his left side, landing sideways on his left foot, then his hip and shoulder. He could feel his ankle pop on impact.

“Shit!” he said as he lay on the floor.

Daniel repelled quickly and stooped next to Collin.

“Are you alright?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t think so. I whippered, then cratered,” Collin said.

“What?”

“Around here, that means I fell far and hit hard. Ahhh!” Collin said as he gripped his ankle. “It’s either sprained or broken. Can you get me to the hospital?”

It was a short ride to the Myrtle Beach Emergency Center. After arriving, Daniel grabbed a wheel chair and took Collin into the waiting area. Given the priority of other injured patients, they knew they had an hour’s wait or more after checking in. They settled in the waiting room and got Collin as comfortable as possible.

“Collin, about last night, I don’t think I was sick from the oysters,” Daniel said.

“What do you mean?” Collin asked, shifting his seating position to get a more comfortable angle on the ankle.

“You might think this is crazy, but I have a real bad feeling about Bryce.”

“Like what kind of feeling?”

“When my dad was killed, I remembered the shooter had a very distinctive voice. Bryce sounded like that individual,” Daniel said softly to avoid any attention.

“So?” Collin said.

“Remember when he said the quote about all men having a journey through life? That’s exactly what the shooter said before he fired on my father. You see, I was hiding in the building when it

Collin looked at his watch while sitting in the lobby of North Myrtle Beach Recreation Center. Poised at the front window, he saw no sign of Daniel, who was fifteen minutes past their agreed meeting time of eleven that Sunday morning.

“Damn oysters,” he mumbled and grabbed a seat.

Shortly after, Daniel entered the front door.

“Hey man. You are looking some kinda rough,” Collin said.

“Thanks. I just didn’t sleep well at all last night, but I try to keep my word,” Daniel said. “Do you have a minute to talk, Collin?”

“How about after our climb? We’re already late for our reservation,” Collin said as he slapped his hand on Daniel’s back and started walking towards the entrance to the indoor climbing arena.

Daniel was surprised by what the arena presented. With over seventy-five hundred square feet of climbing area, multiple overhanging lead caves, and an observation balcony, he was very impressed to say the least.

“Man. They don’t have indoors like this back at Dunkirk,” Daniel said.

“It’s one of the best in the state. Let’s get our gear on,” Collin said.

They suited up and hit the first face. With both being experienced in the sport, they decided to self-belay as opposed to using the automatic fall protection ropes. It was a bit more dangerous, but exponential in excitement. Collin excelled to the top face of their first run, and then began repelling down to meet Daniel around the three quarter mark.

“Oysters slowing you down?” Collin asked as he continued his repel.

At the halfway point, Collin looked down to anticipate his landing spot when he suddenly lost the grip of his belay rope. He fell quickly

happened. I heard the whole thing, but I couldn't quite see their faces. It was too far," Daniel said.

"Dan, I think you're reading too much into this. I've heard that same quote probably a dozen times before," Collin said as he turned his attention towards his ankle. "Besides, if you really think he's dirty, why not just call the cops and let them check him out."

"Sure. I guess they'll believe my voice and quote theory just like you. If this guy is the one, and he smells any trace of the police on him, he'll run," Daniel said.

"Mr. Collin Peterson. I need your insurance information," the administrator behind the waiting room desk spouted.

"Damn it! I lost my card a while ago." Collin said.

"Try calling your parents," Daniel said.

"I know my dad was going deep sea fishing. Not many cell towers out there, so he doesn't bother to take his phone. I'll try my mom's cell. I thought she was going to hook up with Bryce again. Geez," Collin said as he shook his head and reached for his phone. His call was unanswered. "Her battery's probably dead as usual."

"Crazy question, but do you have Bryce's cell?" Daniel asked.

"No, but my mom said he works for Santerra Realty. We could try there," Collin said.

Daniel grabbed his cell phone, dialed information, received the local number for Santerra Realty, and dialed away.

"Hello, I'm trying to reach Bryce Andrews please," Daniel said.

"I'm sorry sir, but we have no one by that name here," the Santerra receptionist replied.

"Are you sure? No Bryce Andrews?" Daniel requested again.

"I'm certain sir. I'm sorry."

Melanie's afternoon was quite the opposite of how Collin envisioned it. After a run in the morning, she settled down to her Signitell laptop to begin checking an engineering documentation package for a design that was ready to go into full production. To her surprise, her memory stick that held the drawings was no where to be found. After running a few errands, she found herself back at Signitell. Her suspicions were right. There was the memory stick plugged into the side of her monitor.

After leaving Signitell, she made her way on to Route 17. Up ahead, she could see the building that she hoped would some day fulfill her dream of owning a coffee house. Although she realized it was far beyond her grasp, as usual, she could count on a smile. She slowed for the red light in front of the location, turned to the right, and felt her stomach sink. A leased sign had been placed in the window, stating "New Business Coming Soon". She was startled by a driver's horn behind her, as it caused her to look forward at the waiting green light.

"Oh well. It was just a dream. Good luck new owners. Make me proud," she said as she stepped on the gas.

She pulled into her driveway next to Collin's car and made her way in. It felt good to be home, but she was aware Monday morning back at Signitell would roll around pretty quickly. Her entrance into the family room gave her the surprise view of Collin on the sofa with his left foot submerged in a five gallon bucket filled with half water and half ice.

"Collin! What happened?" Melanie said as she sat her car keys on the end table.

"Grade two ankle sprain. Two stretched ligaments but no tear," Collin said.

“How? Did you go rock climbing?”

“Yes. Long story, but we need to talk about another topic, Mom.”

“Shoot.”

“You’ve been going out with Bryce for what? A month now?”

“I think so. I’m not really tracking it, Collin.”

“What do you know about him? His past? Where he lives? Where he works?” Collin said.

“I don’t like the tone you’re using, and I don’t think I need to answer your questions at this point in time Collin. We’re just dating. Besides, I need to move on with my life some time. I know you think a great deal of your father, and I respect that, but we’re separated now and it will probably end up in a divorce,” Melanie said as she went on the defensive. In her mind, it was a bit premature but she just wasn’t in the mood for criticism.

“I called Santerra Realty today. They said they have no knowledge of a Bryce Andrews, Mom.”

“Why?”

“I needed my insurance information. Your cell was off, and I figured you guys were out together.”

“Which branch did you call?” Melanie asked.

“What?”

“Which branch of Santerra Realty did you call? You realize there’s three or more on the South Carolina coast alone,” Melanie said.

Collin looked down at the bucket and contemplated his next volley, coming up short.

“I just don’t like him, Mom.” Collin said.

Melanie sat down on the sofa next to him and placed her hand on his.

“Collin, I think what you’re feeling is perfectly normal, and I

understand," as she moved her voice to more of a friendly tone. "I appreciate your concern, but give the old Mom a little credit in her decision making. OK? Now let me do a little nurturing and see how I can help with this ankle."

Collin pressed the door bell to Seapointe 1404 and waited for a minute before his call was answered. His dad opened the door and immediately looked down at his crutches and bandaged foot.

"Collin! What the heck happened to you?" Alex said. "Come on in."

After his separation with Melanie hit its seventh month, Alex decided it was time to look for a more permanent residence other than a loaned bedroom at a friend's house. His love for the ocean brought him to take a one year lease on a waterfront condominium in North Myrtle Beach. Within a mile of the house he shared with Melanie, it still offered him aspects of his prior home and its surroundings which helped to dampen the stressful life change he had endured.

"Can I get you a beer? We can grab a spot out on the balcony," Alex said as he opened the refrigerator door.

They made their way to the balcony and grabbed seats at the outdoor bar chairs. Their high position helped to offer a better view over the solid, low wall of the balcony. Folks were scurrying about on the beach below as the evening hours brought them out for relaxing activities after dinner. The sun was setting behind the Seapointe, allowing it to cast shadows across the beach. Low tide provided a time for parents with young children to look for sand crabs in the small pools formed by the receding waters.

"I love the view, Dad," Collin said after taking a sip from his beer.

"Yeah. Me too. So tell me about the leg. What brings this unexpected visit on a Monday night?" Alex said.

Collin gave him the brief version of his rock climbing event, but was sure to list Daniel as only a friend while leaving out the part about his suspicions.

“But Dad, the real reason why I came by has to do with Mom. Do you know she’s seeing some one?” Collin said.

Alex looked out across the water and grabbed a long, drawn out drink of his beer before replying.

“I had a hunch Collin, but I wasn’t quite sure. Usually she’s pretty professional with me at work. You know, keeping her distance, but lately she’s been more carefree. I assumed the change had to do with some one else,” Alex said. “Who is he?”

“Well he claims to be in real estate, and she seems to be liking him, but I’m getting a bad feeling about him, Dad. She doesn’t really know much about him and I’m thinking he’s lying to her. When I talk to her, she’s not receptive to my concerns” Collin said.

Alex could feel the ache inside his chest. After spending so many years with Melanie, he tried to prepare himself for another man coming into her life after their separation. No matter how much preparation he put into it, he wasn’t ready for this.

“Collin, you know I still love your Mom,” Alex said.

“I know, Dad.”

“In my heart, I felt like giving her time with the separation might bring her back to me, and it hurts to think it’s just the opposite. I mean, I’m to blame for her loss of trust in our relationship, but I really thought it would all work out for us in the long run. Like I deserve the punishment of not being with her, but eventually I would be forgiven,” Alex said. “What can I do?”

“Well, I feel like I need to know more about him, for mom’s sake. I thought of following him to see what he’s all about, but I remembered

you mentioned Aspen to me a few months back," Collin said.

"I know what you're thinking son, but I can't do that," Alex said, sitting his beer on the nearby table.

"Dad, he'll never know. Look at it as a really thorough field test. We use one of your old prototypes for a while and get it back to Signitell before any one even realizes it was gone," Collin said.

"What makes you think this guy has issues big enough that you have to track him," Alex asked.

"I just have a really good hunch. Let's leave it at that so you don't think I'm crazy," Collin said.

Alex reached for his beer, grabbed another drink and stared at the kite that hovered just beyond their balcony. He could see its owners down on the beach. A father and a young son were consumed by the kite's back and forth path. It reminded him of their past.

"I suppose a test would never hurt, but this has to remain between you and I, with your mother having no clue of what's going on. Understood?" Alex said looking directly at him and receiving Collins nod.

"I'm serious Collin," Alex added. "Now when and where are they getting together next?"

"It looks like it's about half way there, Mel. If this golf deal goes as planned, it could mean a seven figure payout for me and that's not including any zeroes to the right of the decimal point," Bryce said.

"I'm in the wrong business. Speaking of business, you said you work for Santerra Realty, didn't you?" Melanie inquired.

Their casual date on Melanie's deck was much more comfortable to both than the last, but Melanie couldn't resist resolving the issue that Collin raised regarding Bryce's employer, especially considering

the alcohol was beginning to take effect.

“I do,” Bryce said, after taking another sip of his drink.

“For one of the local branches?” Melanie said.

“No. Actually the local branches are all residential. I’m from commercial up in Boston.”

“Are they separate entities?”

“They are. Almost like two different companies. Let’s say they never really talk,” Bryce said, thinking back to his original outlay of calculated stories that rolled with his current identity. “Why the fifty questions?”

“Just a little conversation until the Swamp Water kicks in,” Melanie said, content with his answers but a little concerned by his change in tone.

“I think its kicking in now. My tolerance is down. Really don’t drink much. What’s in this stuff any way?” Bryce said.

“Seven up, and sweet and sour mix. Oh, and just a dash of lime vodka and apricot brandy,” she said with a slight giggle.

“I think you have your portions reversed. It’s got a kick,” Bryce said as he leaned across the table for a kiss that was well received by Melanie.

“Maybe we should grab the outdoor sofa. Just a little more comfortable,” Melanie said as she led him by the hand.

Bryce admired the firmness of her bottom in her shorts as she began to stand while he was still seated. Her white tank top gave just enough of a view of her breasts to cause him to remember how they caught his eye on their first date at the Australian Grille. Their perkiness made him think they weren’t owned by a woman in her forties, but he knew she took good care of her body through physical fitness. They began kissing slowly, almost innocently, and then let it

build into a deep session. Bryce slid his hand from her knee to her inner thigh. She could feel the ache as she wanted him to go beyond where his palm stopped, but she remembered they had company.

“We just have to keep in mind we’re not the only ones home tonight,” Melanie said as she pointed to the lighted window of Collin’s room.

In front of her home, a much different scenario began to play out. Alex had received a phone call from Collin a little over an hour earlier, informing him that Bryce was at the house. He saw his intended target, Bryce’s black Suburban, but figuring nightfall would provide a little cover, Alex decided to make his way under the second level wrap around porch and scope out his competition. He quietly moved toward the rear of the house, going unnoticed as he spied the couple enthralled in each other. Bryce was some what on top of Melanie, fully clothed though, and Alex could hear more than he bargained for. The sting made him head back to the front of the home where he immediately climbed under the Suburban.

“Mel, I better go,” Bryce said as he leaned back from her embrace. “It’s really getting tough to hold back, and I’m worried about Collin coming down.”

“I know. It’s an inconvenience with kids, even when they’re older. Are you OK to drive?” Melanie asked.

“I am. Just a little fuzzy,” Bryce said before going in for another kiss.

“Bryce, I want to go out on your boat next time. Just you and I. No distractions,” Melanie said.

“Deal. How about we pull a weekender next week? I’ll probably be tied up with business over the next few days,” he said.

“Deal,” Melanie quickly followed.

Bryce got up, grabbed a few more kisses and a long hug before he went down the deck steps to the side of the house. As he began to round the corner of the Suburban, he almost ran face first into Alex. Bryce grabbed him by his shoulders and pushed him back slightly.

“What the?” Bryce said as he let go of his shoulders.

“Easy pal! I’m Alex. I’m here to see my son,” Alex said as he felt his heart pounding. He just made it out from under the vehicle when he heard Bryce’s footsteps. He realized this was definitely not work he was cut out for as his whole body shook. They both stepped back for a minute and sized each other up.

“I could lie and say it’s a pleasure, but I have to go,” Bryce said as he walked to the side of Alex and opened the Suburban’s door.

Bryce pulled away and left Alex standing in the driveway. Alex felt so many different emotions, that he didn’t know exactly what to think. It took a minute for him to get it together, and then he looked up at the front door. Alex felt like he just couldn’t go in, like it wasn’t his place any more. As he began walking back towards the condo, he reached for his phone and dialed Collin’s cell.

“Hi Collin. This is Dad. Aspen is on his truck so open the laptop and run the program. Aspen will store his travel log, and then pulse transmit it every six minutes before going back into a hide mode. It’s virtually undetectable. Call me in about a half hour and we’ll go over what you’re seeing. I’m going home. I need a freakin‘ drink!”

Chapter 14

The status bar slowly came to life. Bryce gazed at the monitor, waiting for it to show that the wiretap transmitter attached to Daman Singh's phone line had done its job. Five percent ... thirty percent ... sixty percent ... ninety percent, and finally a "Download Complete" message. He had the second digital treasure he hoped for late Monday morning, with the first being the download from the phone line of Travis Davenport. Bryce closed the case of his laptop and unplugged its power cord from the DC jack of his Suburban.

"Remember. Recharge the battery once in a while, dummy" he said.

After securing his gear, he got himself situated to make the trip back to his yacht to survey his newly acquired phone conversations. Before pulling from his location approximately fifty yards from Singh's house, he noted two figures leaving the front door and making their way to the mini van that sat on the driveway. Bryce grabbed his binoculars for a closer look. A ten second observation told him what he didn't want to know. It appeared that Singh had a wife and a very young daughter. The little one appeared to be less than kindergarten age, with a cute little walk that reflected some instability. The woman opened the van door and placed the little girl into her car seat. Her smile at her mom seemed to linger in Bryce's eyes before they were concealed by the closing door. He felt some wind exit his sails, as he pictured the little one growing up without a father, and it was all due to a careless mistake her dad made in getting involved with Recov.

"This is starting to get old," he said as he pulled forward and turned down a side street prior to nearing Singh's house.

Bryce took his time in getting back to the Sabreline. His trip was broken up by a text message from Melanie.

“Enjoyed the swamp water with you. Can’t wait for ocean water this weekend,” she had typed. It made him smile.

After settling into the Sabreline, he fired up his laptop and began the conversion of the phone tap files from speech to text, highlighting only the ones made between the households of the two targets. Even with this smaller selection, he knew this would be a lengthy process given he had checked an option to create a database of keywords used in the conversations. Bryce left the laptop to do its thing, changed into his running apparel, and pounded the asphalt.

An hour and a half later, he returned to the yacht, grabbed a tall glass of iced, green tea and swiped the touch screen of the laptop. Its display came to life and showed the conversion was complete. Bryce grabbed a seat and opened the keyword database. He focused on the list, which contained words such as “meeting”, “together”, “date” and similar phrases. He was intent on finding when the two targets may be planning to get together in the near future, knowing he would have to terminate both at the same time to avoid losing the non-terminated one to flight after word of a solo kill. Fifteen minutes of scanning would pass before he locked on to a possible clue.

“meet for a round at the legends on monday september fourth. we could play the parkland at nine ...” the text line stated. Bryce hated how it didn’t capitalize.

A survey of the before and after dialogue indicated a meeting, but he still had one more step before confirmation. Bryce listened to the audio segment of one of the downloaded files and confirmed the voices belonged to Singh and Davenport. He had his time and date, but only obtained the place after a combined search of “Myrtle

Beach", "Legends", and "Parkland" on the Internet. He now knew they would die together during a golf outing.

Tuesday morning brought Bryce to the Legends Golf Resort. Given he had one week to prepare for the kill, he decided to survey the Parkland course possibly once or twice during the upcoming days in planning his shooting location. With his golf game being rusty, he figured he could use the practice as well.

Bryce was impressed with the facilities and playing areas the resort had to offer, plus the sheer size of its six courses was perfect for any one to get lost in and not draw attention to themselves. After getting oriented with the overall picture, Bryce focused on the par seventy two Parkland field.

Some disappointment set in as he completed the first nine holes. He noticed no prime spots where he could hide and make his shots, but the second nine would give a different story. Hole eleven offered a large group of trees near not only the hole itself, but also a secluded course maintenance road that would allow an easy exit to the primary parking lot. Even better, the grounds showed no evidence of camera security. He determined a second day's trip was unnecessary, as his kill spot was finalized. The only task he had left was in completing the last seven holes that day. Bryce would end up shooting an eighty one.

After finishing Friday evening's dinner on the Sabreline, Bryce reviewed his pantry for the upcoming weekend on the water with Melanie. He was well stocked for the almost two days they planned to be at sea, but he felt like some thing was missing. A look at his bar gave him the idea he wanted. He needed a theme drink, and Melanie's recent text message gave him an idea.

“Internet, don’t fail me now,” he said as he brought his laptop out of standby mode.

After a few key and mouse clicks, he was staring at the recipe for Ocean Water.

“I have the coconut rum and the Sprite. Just missing the Blue Curacao liqueur,” he said as he reached for his keys and ensured his wallet was tucked in his back pocket.

Bryce impatiently took the Suburban through the small, twisty roads of the marina. He felt some what relieved to hit the main road that led to the store area, even though the thirty five mile an hour speed limit was under his comfort level. He found himself lost in visualizing his anticipated events with Melanie on the water when he was snapped out of his subconciousness by flashing red and blue lights in the rear view and side mirrors. He didn’t think to grab a pistol before leaving the yacht, and he had no weaponry in the Suburban.

“Well. Let’s hope the identification team did a good job on Bryce Andrews,” he mumbled as he pulled to the right side of the road and placed his vehicle in park.

Collin made his way from his bedroom down to the kitchen. His arm pits were sore from the crutches and his head felt fuzzy given the broken sleep he experienced last night due to his throbbing left ankle. He could hear his mom upstairs as she moved from bathroom to bedroom and back. Staring at the open cabinet that held their breakfast cereals, Collin knew he would find comfort in a big, mixed bowl of Captain Crunch and Quaker Squares. He was a firm believer that no cereal should ever be eaten by itself.

With breakfast in hand, he hobbled to the sofa in the living room, planted himself down and reached for the television remote. The set

came to life to broadcast a variety of Saturday morning infomercials that offered items from cutting knives to rotisseries, and exercise equipment to weight loss products. His finger stopped pressing the channel button when a breaking news banner caught his eye, and a blonde reporter began speaking to him.

“What we currently know at this time is that last night, Horry County Police took a suspect into custody that they are linking to the murders of nine people at Recov Incorporated,” the reporter said.

Collin froze, with his breakfast bowl in one hand and television remote in another. He slowly lowered each to his lap as he gazed at the television.

“Local and federal authorities have not released the name of this individual, but we hope to get that information to you as soon as we receive it,” the reporter continued to spout.

A glance to the right gave Collin a view of the item he was hoping was within reach. He grabbed his cell phone and previewed his contacts before clicking Daniel’s name.

“Hello,” Daniel said in a groggy voice.

“Dan! Have you seen the news?” Collin said.

“No. I ...”

“Well turn on channel thirteen. They took some one into custody for my uncle’s murder!” Collin interrupted. He could hear Daniel clicking on the other end.

“Did they give a name?” Daniel asked.

“No. Said they might have it later. Hey, I have to go. Some one’s knocking on the door. I’ll give you a call back in a little while,” Collin said as he clicked the “end” button on the phone and began to try to stand up.

“I got it Col,” Melanie said as she darted down the steps and to the

front door, catching Collin by surprise.

Melanie opened the door, but not enough to allow Collin a full view of the visitor.

“Hey. Good to see you! Come in. I’ll be ready in five minutes,” Melanie said as she opened the door further in a welcoming gesture.

To Collin’s surprise, Bryce stepped into his view as he made his way into the house. Collin immediately clicked off the television.

“Good morning, Collin” Bryce said with a smile.

“Good morning,” Collin replied in a slow, flabbergasted sort of way. He turned his attention to his mother. “Big plans for today?”

“Yes. We’re heading out on Bryce’s yacht. I’ll have my cell if you need me, but I’m not sure of the reception. Be back Sunday. And Collin, no parties. Understand?” Melanie said with a smile stretched from ear to ear.

Collin did not reply. Melanie finished grabbing a few things and she and Bryce made their way out the front door. Collin immediately dialed his cell.

“Dan. Collin. It’s not who we thought it was ...”

Late that afternoon, Bryce and Melanie found themselves seated on the aft deck of the Sabreline, approximately three miles off the North Myrtle Beach Coast. After settling on this destination and having a late lunch, they decided it was time to unwind with drinks and enjoy the view.

“Wow. You know I don’t often get the chance to see my home area from this perspective,” Melanie said as she went for a sip of her drink.

“You have the Sea-Doo,” Bryce said.

“I know. But I mean not in this type of luxury. A girl could get use to this,” Melanie replied.

Bryce smiled and sipped his drink. He felt so at ease with her in this environment, with no external issues pressing him.

“I forgot to tell you. I had a chance to meet your local law enforcement last night,” Bryce said.

“You did?”

“Yes. I realized I was missing one key ingredient for our drinks, went out in a hurry, and the officer was nice enough to remind me of the speed limit.”

“Did you get a ticket?” Melanie asked.

“No. Just a warning. I think he fell for my “out of town, request for forgiveness act”,” Bryce said.

“That’s good. Or you could be in jail right now and not out here with me drinking Ocean Water. By the way, nice mix.”

“Thanks. I can tell you’re enjoying them. That’s what? Number four?” Bryce said with a laugh.

“Hey! You’re pouring them. It’s your fault. I’m only drinking them,” she returned with a giggle. “You’re looking awfully lonely over there. Mind if I come over?” Melanie said, noticing the drinks were really starting to kick in.

Bryce sat his drink down and patted his lap. Melanie sat her drink aside and climbed on his offered seat, then wrapped her arms around his neck. They began to slowly kiss, and then allowed their actions to become more intense. With his shirt off, Bryce could feel the side of her breast against his shoulder as it slipped past her bikini top. He enjoyed its warmth.

“Shall we go inside?” Bryce said in between kisses.

“What did you have in mind?” Melanie said.

“A spot a little softer than this chair,” Bryce laughed.

He led her up to the helm deck and into the yacht’s interior.

“Give me one second,” Bryce said as he let go of her hand and disappeared into the bedroom.

Melanie could hear smooth jazz softly fill the cabin. Bryce returned for her hand and led her into the bedroom. Candles adorned both sides of the bed. He sat on the edge and brought her to him, keeping her in a standing position. Slowly, he kissed her exposed, tight stomach, and then reached behind her back to untie her bikini top. She let it drop to the floor, wanting him to kiss her breasts. He obliged, and she could feel her body awakening for him. Bryce stood and they finished undressing each other before enjoying the comfort of the bed. During the next two and a half hours, they would make love three times, among other things, before Melanie assumed a relaxing position in the nook of Bryce’s arm.

“I so needed that,” Melanie said as she rubbed his bare torso, admiring the striation in his pecs and abs.

Bryce smiled and began rubbing her hair gently. He could feel her move into a relaxed state, as her body began to twitch. He quickly fell asleep as well.

They awoke a little over two hours later, throwing smiles each other’s way. Melanie peered out through one of the windows and saw the orange hues the sun presented as it began to set just over the coast.

“Come on! We have to catch this,” Melanie said.

“Naked?” Bryce asked.

“Yes, we’re going to miss it,” she replied as she started toward the bedroom door.

She went to the aft deck and assumed a position against the railing. The sun was almost three quarters below the horizon. Bryce

walked up behind her, wrapped his arms around her front, just below her breasts, and nested his front in the exterior of her bottom. They watched the sun finish its path for the day and enjoyed the warmth they were feeling. Melanie felt Bryce becoming aroused again behind her.

“One more?” she said as she turned to face him with a big smile.

“One more,” he said, leading her back inside.

After finishing, they found themselves somewhat awake from the prior nap, and it seemed they burned off the Ocean Water.

“I think I’m falling, Bryce,” Melanie said as she laid on her stomach and propped her head up on her hands.

“Ah. That’s just the Ocean Water talking,” Bryce said with a giggle.

Melanie giggled as well, but Bryce could see her face become more serious shortly thereafter.

“Mel. I’ve been doing alot of thinking lately. About where I am in my life and about where I really want to be. There have been a few recent influences lately, with you being the biggest, that make me want to change my current path,” Bryce said. She smiled, as she enjoyed him opening his feelings to her.

“In what ways?” she inquired.

Bryce reached to the side of the bed, opened a drawer, removed a small, gift wrapped box and sat it next to her. They both looked down at it before their eyes met once again. Melanie reached for it.

“Don’t open it now. There are three items inside that will help you and I change paths. After I wrap up the golf resort deal on Monday, I’ll probably have to head back up to Boston for a few weeks, but I’ll be back. I want you to hold onto this box, and when I come back, I want us to open it together. Deal?” Bryce said.

Melanie smiled at him. “Deal,” and sealed it with a kiss.

It would be Sunday afternoon, and a few more memories before she made it back to her house.

Bryce looked down at his wrist watch. Nine four displayed in its date area - the last day of the lives‘ of Daman Singh and Travis Davenport - among others.

Monday brought him back to the Parkland course of the Legends Golf Resort. With his golf bag slung over his back, he made his way to the eleventh hole. In a similar disguise that he used during the night of Riverwatch, his gray hair and mustache gave him the look of ten years past his real time on Earth. He sat his bag down and gave a three hundred and sixty degree turn to take in his environment. All was quiet for now, with no one in sight, but he knew it was still early. After eyeing a bench just beyond the tree line, he grabbed his bag and made his way to the seat. It gave him a perfect view of the area where the hole’s visitors would tee off. Knowing Singh and Davenport mentioned a nine thirty start, and given his estimate that it would take them four hours to play the course, he assumed they would appear between eleven thirty and twelve.

Bryce inhaled a deep breathe of the fresh morning air as he crossed his legs and spread his arms across the back of the bench. The birds chirped and fluttered about, giving a quiet serenity to the atmosphere. The occasional passing clouds did not allow the sun to warm the morning, as he could feel just a slight touch of Fall. With his weekend with Melanie still in his mind, he also noticed his level of focus was not at its typical high. It didn’t alarm him though, and that did not feel out of the ordinary to him for once. Movement at the tee off area snapped him out of his melancholy, as a peek through his binoculars showed his intended targets. He quickly walked to his

planned shooting location.

Placing his bag against a tree, Bryce took another survey of the area. While he could no longer see Singh or Davenport, he knew they would be making their way to the hole that was in front of him. No one else was seen or heard in the area, and his location several rows of trees back from the green gave him complete privacy. Bryce reached for his golf bag. He didn't remove a club, but his Austrian TPG-1 sniper rifle. With its modular design, it easily fit in his bag in two pieces. A quick connect of the silencer equipped barrel to the rest of the weapon, and a load of the first round made him fully prepared for his kill. He lowered the rifle to the grass and waited, like a deer hunter going into a dormant state until that twelve point buck crossed his path.

One ball bounced on the green in front of him, and then another that was closer to his location, but still in good play. Passing clouds dimmed the green. Bryce heard voices, but couldn't see their owners. He reached for his rifle and assumed a target stance against the slightly angled trunk of a nearby tree. Peering through the scope, he spotted Singh and Davenport walking down the green together towards their next driving positions. They were both facing him and he knew he had to make an almost simultaneous kill on their next pause.

Bryce aimed through his scope at the right eye of Singh, who was left of Davenport. A slight squeeze of the highly balanced trigger of the TPG-1 sounded a low volume click as the bullet left its barrel. He wasted no time in looking to see if it hit its intended target as he immediately locked on Davenport's eye and squeezed. The total duration between shots would be less than a second. It was impressive marksmanship to say the least.

His next view from the scope showed both men laying on the

green on their backs. Singh's body was completely still, while Davenport's leg twitched for a second or two. The green lit up with sun light as the passing clouds made their way beyond its path.

Bryce lowered his weapon and panned the area with his binoculars. Again, no one. He locked in on the view of the bodies once more and exhaled. It was over. Not just this part of the mission, but in his mind, it was finally all over. He quickly gathered both himself and his belongings, then made a hasty exit down the nearby maintenance road.

Chapter 15

*****

To: cathy@aerolink1020.net
From: jco@comsat721.com
Subject: Dessert

Cathy,

I hope you enjoyed dessert. No need to pick up the tab ... It's all on me.

Our time together was memorable, but unfortunately, all good things must come to an end.

I bid you a fond farewell.

Jacob

*****

Bryce felt a huge amount of relief as he clicked the send button. Not caring whether he received a reply, he closed his email program and opened the software that controlled the Sabreline's local vicinity radar. After setting it to auto sweep every ten minutes, he stood up from the galley table and tucked a Sig-Sauer in his back holster.

Bryce grabbed a cold glass of green tea and made his way to the helm deck to get some air.

With three o'clock in the afternoon approaching, the Myrtle Beach Yacht Club was fairly quiet. An occasional boater would be seen on the docks, with a passing watercraft here and there, but all was peaceful. Bryce removed his pistol from his back holster, placed it beside him in his seat, and got comfortable. He began replaying the morning's events at the golf course, recalling the effect the passing clouds had on the lighting of the greens. The calls of the birds echoed in his head. In his own way, he locked in on the positive aspects of his experience and tried deeply to erase the negative feelings of taking two lives. In his opinion, life was beginning anew. A half hour rolled by before he was snapped out of his serenity by the ring of his cell phone.

"Hello," he answered.

"Jacob? This is Cathy," she replied, as her fear almost jumped through the phone.

Bryce looked down at his cell phone to evaluate the dialing number.

"Cathy? Where are you calling from?"

"I'm calling from a pay phone in Conway. Jacob, you have to leave the area!" Cathy cried.

"Slow down. What going on?' he said as he reached for the Sig-Sauer and eyed the marina.

"Jacob, the Org got your email regarding the completion and they know you're running," Cathy said.

"That was my intention."

"Oh my god! Wait a minute. There's a car pulling up to the phone booth. Oh my god, I'm scared!" she said, pausing for a few seconds.

”Cathy, what’s going on?“ Bryce said, receiving her silence. He could hear her crying softly.

”Jacob. They’re just going into the store. They’re not who I thought they were,“ she said, trying to gain her composure.

”Are you being followed?“ Bryce queried.

”I don’t know. But you have to leave the area, Jacob. You have to leave today! They’re sending a cleaner team to the region late this evening to ... oh my god, I think they going to terminate me too!“ she said as she burst into tears.

”Cathy. You need to get a hold of yourself. You’ve dialed my cell phone. Remember, any one can listen in on a cell call. Do you understand me?“ he said slow and steady, trying to calm her. ”I’m going to call you back on a land line.“

”Jacob! Please don’t hang up! You have to take me with you! You have too! Oh my god, I don’t want to die!“ she said, screaming and crying.

”As I said, I will call you back. I want you to meet me and we’ll leave tonight. Is that understood? When I call you, I’ll give you directions on how to proceed from this point. Is that clear? You need to make sure you’re not being followed first,“ he continued calmly.

”I don’t know! I mean yes. I’m just really scared right now, Jacob.“

Bryce redialed and completed his land line call with Cathy. He then grabbed his cell again and scrolled for Melanie’s mobile number.

After finishing a day of Monday courses at Coastal Carolina University, Collin was glad to walk in the front door of home. His fourth year as a computer science major was starting off in a more challenging manner than he anticipated. After sitting his laptop bag down, he turned his attention to the answering machine. The flash of

one new message caught his curiosity.

”Hello, Mel. This Bryce. I tried your cell, but no luck. I just wanted to let you know that I wrapped up the golf resort deal and I’ll be leaving for Boston tonight. I think I mentioned it during our cruise. I’ll try to call in a few days. Be back in a few weeks, and remember the box I gave you. We’ll open it together when I return. By the way, I forgot to answer your comment Saturday. I’m falling too.“ Bryce’s voice ended.

Collin shook his head and made his way to the kitchen. Potato chips were his main source of refueling after a long day. He just couldn’t get enough them. After grabbing a seat in the family room with his bag of golden treasures in hand, he anticipated some mindless television when his cell phone rang.

”Hello.“

”Collin! Are you home right now?“ Daniel’s voice burst out of the phone.

”Hey Dan! Just walked in the door ...“

”Don’t move! I’ll be there in ten minutes,“ Daniel said as he hung up the phone.

Sure enough, Daniel knocked on Collin’s front door in less than ten minutes. He nearly pushed his way in when Collin answered.

”Is any one home?“ Daniel asked.

”Just me,“ Collin replied.

”No one else?“ Daniel asked as he looked around.

”Daniel, what the hell’s going on?“

Daniel steadied himself before he started.

”Have you seen the local news?“

”No. I’ve been at school all day. This year’s really kicking my ...“

”There’s been another shooting! Over at some golf course near

Conway. They're linking it to the Recov killings, man! The right eye shot," Daniel said as the tension in his voice heightened.

"You mean they took the wrong guy into custody," Collin said.

"Yeah! Do you still have that tracking thing running?" Daniel asked.

"Holy shit!" Collin said slowly, feeling his stomach tighten. "Let's hit my room."

The two of them scrambled upstairs. Collin grabbed a seat at his desk and brought the Aspen laptop to life.

"Do you know exactly when and where the shooting occurred?" Collin asked.

"The news report mentioned the Legends Golf Resort just before noon today," Daniel answered as he leaned over Collin's shoulder.

The download program showed the tracking log being received by the laptop's hard drive. After one hundred percent was displayed, Collin opened the logging software. He highlighted today's log with his mouse and a map of the area began to materialize. After it fully displayed, a tracking line began generating, showing waypoints with time date stamps. Nine thirty - departure from Myrtle Beach Yacht Club. Six minutes after ten, Bryce's vehicle arrived at the Legends Golf Resort, only to leave at twelve minutes after twelve. Collin felt his stomach drop, while the pressure Daniel felt the night he met Bryce came back to haunt him.

"That son of a bitch! He's the one. I freakin' knew it!" Daniel yelled as he paced the floor.

Collin gulped the air before speaking. "He's leaving for Boston tonight, Dan."

"What?"

"Yeah. He left a message on the answering machine. Said he'd be back in a few weeks."

”He’s running! No way man! He’s running!“ Daniel yelled. ”Shit! Where is he now?“

They turned their attention back to the laptop.

”He’s been back at the yacht club for a while. Or at least his vehicle has,“ Collin said.

”Here’s the plan. I’m heading to the yacht club. He’s not getting away. You call the cops and send them there. One way or another, this bastard’s going down!“ Daniel said as he raced out of the room.

”Dan! Are you nuts? What are you going to ...“ Collin ended, realizing his effort was futile, as he heard the front door slam.

Fear shot through Collin’s body as he wondered if his mom and Bryce were in the same place. A call to her cell revealed it was turned off. A call to Signitell ate up a number of minutes while the answerer tried to locate her.

”She’s here, but I think she’s tied up in a meeting,“ the voice said.

”That’s all I wanted to know, just tell her to call her son as soon as she can. And that I love her.“

After placing a call to the rental agency to pick up his Suburban at the marina, Bryce performed a second check of the interior of his yacht to ensure all items were stored for departure. All systems were go on the inside, thinking he just needed one more guest.

Bryce moved up to the helm deck to make final exterior preparations. He looked around, relying on his own visuals instead of the radar sweep. The docks were getting too busy, and it made him all the more uncomfortable. Bryce turned his attention to the removal of interior pillows from the helm deck for storage inside when he was startled by two feet hitting his aft deck.

”Don’t move! Don’t freaking move an inch,“ a voice said, as Bryce

turned to face his unanticipated visitor.

Standing before him was Daniel with a pistol in his right hand, and wearing a somewhat puffy jacket that was not typical of the current weather.

”What? You’re the guy from Barefoot Landing. What the hell do you want?“ Bryce said as he slowly raised his hands. Scenarios shot through his head as to how he could reach to his back and out gun the younger man. The only thing that stopped Bryce from making an attempt was that he noticed the hammer on the intruder’s gun was cocked back, giving him a huge time advantage if Bryce decided to meet force with force.

”Does the name Michael Carlington ring a bell?“ Daniel asked, as he carefully stepped up to the helm deck.

Bryce’s mind ran rampant on the name. He finally recalled the individual as a target from many years ago, but Bryce did not respond.

”He was my father, and you took his life twelve years ago. You bastard!“ Daniel said as he raised the gun slightly.

Again, Bryce did not respond. He recalled the kill, but he was more interested in turning the situation in his favor. Police sirens began to break the background silence.

”Now we’re just going to stay in this position until they get here,“ Daniel said as he slightly waved the gun in the direction of the incoming sirens.

Suddenly, Daniel’s left shoulder exploded, showering blood in the air as his body spun clockwise. He fell into the side of the helm deck’s wall and lay on his stomach. Bryce couldn’t see Daniel’s pistol. He quickly turned his attention to the origin of the blast that stopped Daniel. Cathy was standing on the pier and moved to the helm deck.

”Cathy. Good timing.“ Bryce said, as he began to move towards

Daniel.

”Stay right there,“ Cathy said as she pointed her pistol at his chest. Bryce’s jaw dropped.

”I know what’s on your mind. I’m not your daughter, you idiot. I am the cleaner team. And not a bad actress if I do say so myself,“ she said with a smirk. ”Now you’re going to step into the cabin slowly, and we’re going to finish this so I can leave before the cops arrive. Clear?“

Bryce began to walk backwards at a snail’s pace with Cathy following. Both were so intent on each other that they didn’t notice Daniel slowly rolling from his stomach. When she neared Daniel, he raised and pointed his gun in her direction, then fired. The bullet missed her and struck one of the bullet proof panes of glass of the helm deck, causing a deafening sound that added to the gun’s initial blast. Cathy’s distraction moved her gun’s aim between the two men, giving Bryce just enough time to remove the Sig-Sauer. He sent one bullet through her right temple, launching her body back to the aft deck. He immediately turned his gun towards Daniel.

”Looks like you won’t make it to twenty two, bitch,“ Bryce said in her direction before following his gun’s aim on Daniel. ”Drop the pistol.“

Daniel followed Bryce’s orders. He began laughing, catching Bryce by surprise.

”You shoot me, and we both die,“ Daniel said, holding a small dead man’s switch in his hand. His jacket opened enough to display a belt that appeared to be lined with explosives. Daniel smiled as he thought of the human resource manager at Ordinance Disposal Technologies, and how she accused him of theft. He wished she could join them right now.

”Every man has a journey through life. Some journeys are just cut

shorter than others“ Daniel said.

Bryce held the pistol on him. He could see the red and blue lights of the police arriving at the yacht club entrance, and realized his time was running low to make a move.

”By now, Melanie should know all about you. Collin and I tracked you to the golf course today. Big killer … out smarted by a couple of young punks,“ Daniel continued his badgering while his confidence peaked. He felt like his life’s mission had finally arrived.

Bryce’s could feel his anger begin to boil, as he recalled how the day’s earlier events closed a bad chapter in his life, and marked a major turning point towards the life he wanted ever since the Org took him over. He tasted it for just a few hours, and now this maggot lying on the floor of his yacht was planning on taking it all away. Not knowing whether the explosives were a bluff, Bryce slowly raised his gun to the right eye of Daniel, fully prepared to let fate take its course.

”Like father, like son,“ Bryce said as he squeezed the trigger.

Standing outside his vehicle at the entrance of the marina, Sheriff Moyer witnessed one small explosion from the yacht, followed by a second massive explosion that engulfed the Sabreline.

Chapter 16

“Ms. Peterson, I’d like to thank you for your time in answering our questions, and I hope our debriefing answered a few questions you may have had,” FBI Agent Farrell said as he sat next to Melanie on the upper rear deck of her house.

“Thank you, Agent Farrell. I’m sorry it took me a few days to call Sheriff Moyer, but I needed some time to get myself together after this entire ordeal. I also needed my family with me to do this, so I thought Saturday would work best for all of us,” Melanie said as she looked toward Collin, Alex, and Sheriff Moyer on the lower deck. “And yes, you have answered a few questions I had, but I just can’t fathom how he could take my brother’s life, especially after knowing my connection to Ed.”

“Ms. Peterson, not to defend the killer, but please realize the person who commits these types of heinous acts typically disconnects all humanity from their victims. They’re looked at as mere targets.”

Melanie remained quiet, contemplating the issues that fought inside her head.

“Well, this should wrap up my segment for today. As the investigation continues, would you mind if I contact you with a question or two?” Agent Farrell asked.

“Certainly. I’ll be glad to help,” Melanie replied.

“Thanks. I just wanted to say, off the record, you’re very lucky to be alive. I’ve tracked Mr. Andrews, well, under many other names, and I’ve seen the damage he’s caused to so many families over the years. Daniel and Collin saved folks from future damage from this monster,” Agent Farrell said.

Melanie looked down at the table. “I know. I wish I would have listened to Collin earlier. But I have to say, I did see the human side of the ”monster“, and my mind feels tormented over whether it was real, or an act?” Melanie said.

“Don’t be, Ms. Peterson. I can assure you this was an act. That’s one reason I attribute to why we could never catch this guy. He was a master at using his act to blend into a community,” Agent Farrell said.

Melanie nodded her head in an expected agreement, but wasn’t so sure.

“Mr. Peterson, you have to show me this tracking thing some time,” Sheriff Moyer said.

“I’d be glad to sheriff, but unfortunately, the tracking thing was never suppose to be public knowledge. I have some explaining to do when I get back to Signitell on Monday,” Alex said.

“I know what you mean, but tell them it saved some folks beyond this past Monday,” Sheriff Moyer said.

“I will, but now I think I have to concentrate on my family for a while. I have some patching up to do,” Alex said.

“Wish you the best,” Sheriff Moyer said with an extended hand. “Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me, I have to head back to the office. Mr. Andrews has given me more paperwork to deal with than I’ve had in years.”

“Thanks sheriff,” Alex said, waiting for his departure to speak with Collin.

“Dad, I’m sorry about Aspen. I ...” Collin started.

“Collin, no apology necessary. You and Daniel were smart enough to see the issue, brought it to my attention, and we acted in your mom’s best interest … together. You may have saved her life, son.

I'm very proud of you," he said with a hug.

"Thanks. If any thing positive comes out of this whole mess, I hope it brings you and mom closer," Collin said.

"I do to. She's opened the door slightly over the past few days, and I'm not sure where we're headed, but we'll see," Alex said as he placed his arm around Collin's back and lead him towards Melanie on the upper deck.

The late September breeze enrobed Melanie's cheeks as she made her usually seven mile trek across the beach of North Myrtle. The morning's early chill seemed to take the wind out of her sails, but she was glad to flush her mind with a long run instead of heading into work early.

She stopped at the rock jetty that signaled her left turn off the beach towards home, but instead, she headed right and walked towards the water. Melanie straddled the sand, raised her hands over her head and leaned from side to side. The near waves mesmerized her for a minute before she changed focus to the horizon, locking on a spot she recalled as belonging to her and Bryce on their weekend away. A smile began stretching across her face, but quickly disappeared as she pictured the face of her brother, Edward. Her emotional volley had struck again, much as it had done for the last few weeks. She turned and made her way up the beach, through the two massive condominium complexes, and headed towards home.

After a hot shower, Melanie wrapped up in a towel and headed to her underwear drawer. As she shifted the garments back and forth for a selection, she spotted the top of the wrapped box Bryce's had given her on the boat. It went untouched since she placed it there. She paused for a moment, then removed it from its place and took it to her

bed. Stretched out on her back, Melanie rotated it in her hands above and wondered, before getting up to return it to the drawer. She shook her head, sat back down on the bed, and began opening it. Inside, she found the three items Bryce had mentioned - two keys and a piece of paper with an address. She recognized the address some what, given it was on Highway Seventeen, but she couldn't quite place it. She then reached for her phone.

"Nancy? Hi this is Melanie."

"Yes. I'm alright, but would you mind passing a message on to my manager and Alex for me? I'm going to take the day off, Nance. I need a little time to myself."

Traveling along Highway Seventeen, Melanie found herself approaching the address. She pulled into the shopping center parking lot and grabbed a space where she could read the addresses above the doors of the stores. Scanning the numbers, she noticed the number listed on the paper matched the number above the store that once held her coffee shop dream. The "New Business Coming Soon" sign still hung in the window.

"No way," she said with a smile.

She exited her car and walked up to the door. Peeking inside, she could still see empty shelves and vacant countertops. With curiosity clenching her gut, she reached for the first key from the box and tried it in the door lock. No luck. A try of the second offered a small click and opened it. Melanie walked in. To her surprise, a large sign leaned against the right wall - "MB Coffee House". A lock box sat on the floor in front of it.

"MB. Is it Myrtle Beach, or Melanie and Bryce?" she said.

Melanie strolled over to the box and grabbed a seat on the floor

next to it. Her first key opened it to display two items inside. The first was a two year lease agreement, paid in full. The second was a deposit slip for an account listed in her name, with a dollar amount showing a number of zeroes to the left of the decimal that she couldn't fathom at that time. She took another scan of the interior from her seated position and smiled.

"Thanks Bryce."

Late October leaves back in Maryland dotted the ground as Tommy hopped off the school bus. His mop of red hair bounced as he ran up to his dad who was waiting on the corner.

"Dad! What are you doing here? Where's the sitter?" Tommy said.

His dad picked him up with a big hug. "Took off work today, Tom. No night shift. Probably be the last warm day we have this year. I wanna take you fishin', but first, let's stop by the houseboat. Gotta show you something," his dad said, placing him on the ground and holding his hand as they walked home.

"Son, grab a seat," his dad said, pointing to the head seat of the dinner table.

Tommy obliged. His dad grabbed an opened envelope from the kitchen counter, removed a piece of paper from within, and sat it in front of Tommy.

"Now tell me what that says," his dad said.

Tommy sat straight up in his chair, ready for his task at hand, and looked down at the paper.

"Maryland college trust fund. Four year to ... to ... toot," Tommy started.

"Tuition," his dad said as he sat beside him.

"Tuition. Paid in full," Tommy finished as he looked up at his dad.

“Son, I don’t know where this came from, but you have your money to become a Marine Biologist.”

Tommy’s face glowed, as his smile grew from ear to ear. He knew.

“Now let’s go fishin’,” said his dad.

They sat on the pier together for two hours without a bite that late afternoon. It reminded Tommy of his last day with Mr. Charlie, and even though he wasn’t there in body, Tommy knew he was there in spirit.

-- The End --

The business of death is quietly making its way into the vacation city of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. An elite assassin has been dispatched to the area to make a bold statement by eliminating not just one individual, but by sweeping an entire company. A master of his trade, he blends into his environment like a chameleon, then fades away like a ghost ... but this mission is very different.

Will his growing wish to lead a normal life and his desire to fall in love flaw his perfect game, or will past demons catch up with him first? It's a life or death race to the finish!

About the author ...

Born in 1967, Stephen Younts has been a life long resident of Baltimore County, Maryland. While both his family and chosen profession in the mechanical engineering realm consume most of his day, Stephen attempts to find time to "check off items on the Life List", with the most recent being authoring a novel ... hence "Sweeper".

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