

FATAL MEASURE

By Brent Ladd

A Codi Sanders Adventure Thriller

Dedicated to my son-in-law Justin, a dedicated family man and a first responder that gives and serves without hesitation. We thank you for your service. He is smart, determined and always eager to bust my chops. We thank you for your service.

Chapter One

(BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS)

1958 – FIRST AIR COMBAT COMMAND – KAECH’ON, NORTH KOREA – 6:20 A.M.

Head down, Mah followed the heels of the polished black boots in front of him. He was afraid to make eye contact with any of his superiors for fear his expression would give him away. The five pairs of boots clicked in unison against the spotless concrete floor. The large hangar was open with no support beams. It had offices and dressing rooms on one side and held seven of the newest Russian fighter jets in the Korean People’s Army Air and Anti-Air Force. They were experimental Mikoyan-Gurevich 17 Frescos, more commonly known as MiG 17s. They were a more sophisticated evolution from the earlier MiG 15s that, during the Korean War, had a significant air supremacy over the allied forces, especially over MiG Alley, an area in northwestern North Korea where the Yalu River empties into the Yellow Sea. Numerous dogfights took place there with suspected Russian and Chinese pilots against the American F-86 Sabre.

The interior hangar space was painted white like a clean room, including the metal superstructure. Equipment and personnel moved in a practiced cadence as final checks and last-minute inspections were completed, each step reliant on the next.

On his shoulders Mah wore the three silver stars set upon a thin blue strip that was stitched under a brass star of a first lieutenant. His muted brown-green uniform with leather helmet and goggles was starting to show its age. He stood at attention along with his comrades in a shoulder-to-shoulder line-up. The officer of the deck, Major Jang Sok, was a short rotund man with matching glasses. The kind of man who looked in your direction, but never at you—disconnected from the human experience. He moved like a snail as he scrutinized each of the pilots, more concerned with what was in it for him than with his charges. His face carried the expression of a man who had just tasted a lemon for the first time. Mah could feel himself start to sweat as he fought to remain still and composed. Twenty minutes ago, he had killed a man.

The 1st Air Combat Command base in Kaech’on was a mix of late 1950’s state-of-the art and Korean War rundown. Mah stepped off the bus and entered the base at 05:00, an hour before his shift, the sun only a glimmer of hope for the coming day. He entered the officer’s mess hall for a cup of tea and was surprised to see it not completely empty. The gray concrete walls echoed with even the slightest conversation.

He sipped at his *nokcha* from a table in the corner, his mind lost on the approaching day. His ears tuned out the various conversations.

The locker room was empty as Mah sat on the worn wooden bench and pulled his assigned locker open. The room was lit by metal china-hat lights that were spaced every ten feet. The floor was concrete, and the beige-colored lockers were set against white block walls. Inside his locker was his flight suit and helmet. Mah pulled out a picture of his mother sitting outside his childhood home and gave it a customary kiss. It was well-worn and faded, like his memory of her. He grabbed his flight suit and draped it across the bench, mentally reviewing his plan one more time.

“You can’t do this.”

Mah spun around at the words and looked up. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

A thin wiry soldier in a corporal’s uniform stood over him. Park Lee was wearing a concerned look with desperate eyes. “I came to stop you.”

“You’ll have to kill me. My mind’s made up,” Mah said.

“Seriously, you would put that on me? I came here to set your mind straight, not to go down some guilt trip with you.” He paused and sat down on the bench. “I know things are tough right now, but we can get through it, together. You don’t have to throw your life away. Think about all the good work you’ve done.”

“There is no one left here for me,” Mah said, not making eye contact with his friend.

The words hurt, and Park turned away. “Fine, but I’m doing this for your own good. You might have to spend a few years thinking about your choices, but you will thank me in the end.” He stood and turned to leave.

“Park, wait...maybe you’re right. I’ve just been struggling lately. My mind has had some destructive thoughts.” He stood and placed a hand on the lockers. “We can do this—together.”

Park stopped and walked back over to Mah, placing his hand on his friend’s shoulder. They stared at each other for a moment. Mah nodded his understanding and then reached out and put his arm around Park. Mah pulled him close, fixing Park in a headlock as he began to squeeze.

“I’m so sorry, Park.”

Park, realizing the danger he was in, fought and struggled for all he was worth, fists and legs flying, body jerking back and forth. Mah caught a fist square on the nose and blood sprayed out, but his grip around Park’s neck never wavered. It was like riding a water buffalo cart with square wheels down a steep hill.

Park’s resistance slowly faded, and Mah hung on long past the required time for death. He sobbed inconsolably as he held his best friend in his arms. There was no going back now.

The reality of the situation finally pulled him from the moment, and he quickly emptied the rest of his gear out of his locker. It took a lot of effort, but Mah managed to stuff most of Corporal Park Lee inside. He was kicking at a dangling foot that would not cooperate, when another pilot entered the room.

“You’re here early today, Mah,” said Third Lieutenant Shin Ji as he spun the combination lock on his locker.

Mah shoved the last body part into his locker and slammed it shut with a heave. He quickly wiped the tears from his face and the blood from his nose. “Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d get a jump on the day,” Mah lied.

“Nothing like killing time in the military, I say,” Shin said.

“Yeah, nothin,’” Mah replied in a monotone. He kept his back to his comrade as he put on his flight suit and placed the picture of his mother in his breast pocket.

Major Jang Sok paused in front of Lieutenant Mah Choon Hee, one of the five pilots standing at attention. Sok had an undeserved dislike for the young officer, which he had never been able to hide. The lieutenant had been on the fast track with the powers above. Someone up there had a real hard-on for this young man, and Major Sok could not, for the life of him, figure out why. He pushed and harassed just enough to make the young pilot’s life a living hell

without it blowing back on him. He looked Mah over from the top of his leather helmet-covered head to the tip of his black boots, letting the man squirm a bit. The humidity was unusually high today, and the room had an oppressive blanket of moist heat, like a locker room on fire. Something caught his attention, and he refocused his on Mah's left boot.

"Is that blood on your shoe?" he demanded.

A flash of fear coursed through Mah's spine, and he quickly wiped the spot of blood away on the back of his pant leg.

"What is the meaning of this?" Major Sok demanded.

Lieutenant Mah Choon Hee quickly looked left, and then right at his comrades. Finally, he looked back up at the major and lied. "Just a minor nosebleed I had this morning, Sir."

The sour expression on Major Sok's face twisted for a beat before he spoke. "Next time, clean up before presenting yourself to the People's Army Air and Anti-Air Force for inspection."

"Yes, Sir," he replied.

Major Jang Sok dismissed his pilots and watched as they saluted and scattered for their planes, each happy to be rid of their commanding officer.

Mah, feeling slightly more hopeful in his plan, jogged for the third jet in the line-up.

Today's flight would take them close to the 38th parallel in a routine border patrol and show of force. It was a path this crew had taken many times. The preflight check had gone well, and Mah was finally shedding the last of his anxiety as he climbed the metal rungs that led to the cockpit. The MiG 17 was a marvel of modern fighter aircraft technology. It had proven itself superior in many ways to what the Americans flew. With speeds approaching Mach1, the sweptwing transonic frontline fighter was their first jet with afterburners, a technology that injected extra fuel into the jet pipe downstream, significantly increasing thrust. The small gray cockpit was a tight fit, even for the five-foot-seven frame of its pilot. Mah shimmed into position and strapped himself into the ejector seat.

The roar of the Rolls-Royce-copy turbine engine, thrusting air through a vent just below his feet and butt, was intense. It always amazed Mah how man had harnessed such power. He pressed the stick between his legs and the fighter moved out of the hangar. He guided it across the tarmac and onto the runway. With the press of a finger, he engaged the afterburners and shot up into the sky, his body slamming back against his seat. A quick bank to the right, and then into a holding pattern waiting for the other jets to be airborne. Once in the air, the five fighters moved into a V-wing formation, much like a flock of flying geese.

Mah slid his fighter into his assigned position for today's exercise, left back, commonly referred to as the Purple Heart position in the formation. The term was first coined during the allied bombing raids over Germany in WWII, as that position always took the most damage. Following the jet in front of him, Mah followed as the squadron headed south for the demarcation line. Because part of the mission was a show of force, the fighters had to fly low enough that they could be seen and heard. There was nothing like a formation of five high-tech jets screeching overhead to make a citizen feel pride in his country, and the same applied in reverse for the enemy to the south.

They crossed scores of rice paddies and small villages, which eventually gave way to a belt of green. Mah looked over his gauges and habitually tapped on his altimeter, making sure it was working properly. He had almost crashed several years before because of a sticky gauge. He pressed his transmit button.

“People’s Team leader, this is Bravo Three. I have an intake warning light. My turbine is heating up. I think I sucked a bird. I need to slow and return to base. Over,” Mah said.

“Copy, Bravo Three. We’ve got this handled. See you back at the base. People’s team leader out.”

Mah reduced his speed and pulled the center stick to the right banking the jet in a tight ninety-degree turn. Once he reached one-hundred and eighty degrees, he continued for another ninety, pointing the nose of his aircraft straight south. He engaged the afterburners and pushed his fighter to near Mach 1. A quick glance over his right shoulder revealed his squadron as nothing more than dots against the blue sky. They were still moving away, unaware.

The 38th parallel or demilitarized zone (DMZ) is an enhanced border that separates North Korea from South Korea. It consists of two parallel high fences topped with razor wire. The earth below is cleared and heavily mined in a four-kilometer-wide buffer zone that divides the country in half. Initially established after WWII, the citizens of Korea were allowed to choose to live in the North or South depending on their politics. Eight years earlier, in June of 1950, a full-frontal invasion across the DMZ from the north started the Korean War. After the war, the reestablishment of the 38th parallel included fences and land mines to further separate the two countries.

From the air, Mah watched below as his fighter crossed the border and entered South Korean airspace. Farmland flashed past as the MiG 17 continued south, leaving behind his homeland and everyone he knew. As part of his training, he had memorized every South Korean and American airbase, and a quick lean on the stick had him heading to the nearest one.

First Lieutenant Mah Choon Hee started his career for the People as a military engineer. He had an eidetic memory and solid drafting skills that quickly put him in the top of his group. His superiors had pushed him into the Air Force due to a lack of qualified soldiers. During training, he proved himself competent enough to qualify as a fighter pilot, a very respected position. His small eyes and narrow face, however, had made him less of a hit with the ladies, and he soon found passion in his work rather than wasting it on social frivolity.

Flying low across the open fields in South Korea, Mah could see a military airbase come into view. This would require some luck and timing to finish his mission.

Mah remembered the leaflet that had literally fallen from the sky one day. The US had sent several helium balloons into the sky to float across the border and into North Korea. Each was rigged with five hundred leaflets that automatically released and fell after an hour in flight. The message was clear and very specific. Any North Korean pilot that would deliver a MiG 17 to the Americans, would be hosted in a country of their choosing and receive one hundred-thousand American dollars for their troubles. Mah had picked up the flyer and devised an inspired plan.

He made no deviation and aimed his jet for the tarmac ahead, flaring his flaps and reducing the power as needed. Halfway down the runway he realized his mistake when an F-86 Sabre suddenly veered left and hit the afterburners to avoid a collision. He had entered the runway from the wrong direction. Mah held his nerve and pushed his fighter into the nearest hangar and cut the engines. The base was caught completely unaware, and soldiers gathered in curiosity rather than assault.

Mah slid the canopy back and climbed awkwardly down the side of the jet without the usual ladder supplied by the ground crew. More gawkers arrived trying to register what was happening. A North Korean communist just flew his new MiG 17 into an American-run South Korean airbase. It started slow, but soon everyone around the jet was clapping and congratulating Mah. He had done something truly remarkable.

Mah let the moment play out. It was a rush to have so many soldiers praise him. His lips curled up revealing his crooked tea-stained smile. This was a day he would never forget.

Now for part two of his plan. The West would never see it coming.

The MiG 17 dropped and arced to the right as an F-100 Super Saber tracked its move. Mah pulled up hard on the stick and watched as the F-100 failed to replicate his maneuver. He would barrel-roll out of the move and drop in just below and behind his target. A quick flick on the gun control and he called in the kill. It was a game of cat and mouse that had been played many times over the last three weeks, each one trying to out-maneuver and target the other's fighter jet. A confirmation over the radio had both jets turning and heading back to base.

Mah had spent the last three months working with a team to take the MiG 17 apart and study every piece. During that time he changed his name to fit into his new world. Lieutenant Mah Choon Hee was now Mark Kroon. He worked hard to improve his rudimentary English and learn the American way of doing things. It was all so different for him.

Once the MiG was photographed and documented, the pieces were reassembled. The completed fighter jet was flown to a Naval air weapons station near China Lake, a dry lakebed in California that stretches for miles across the open desert. Mah...Mark had watched as several test pilots took their time to familiarize themselves with the MiG. Even a promising up-and-coming major named Charles "Chuck" Yeager flew the Russian's latest frontline fighter.

After the initial test flights, the MiG was recommissioned as a training jet for new pilots heading to the Vietnam War, now in its third year. Mark was instrumental in testing and running aerial dogfights over the dry landscape, giving US pilots a taste of what they might be up against with the Viet Cong and their Russian training. His ability to look at something once and retain the information made him a quick study, and the US took advantage of his knowledge and skills.

Most nights Mark would return to his modest dwelling just outside the base and work on his other passion, a series of pamphlets on aeronautical engineering treatises. They covered the basics and a few of the more advanced developments of the emerging technology. Each one contained diagrams and hand-drawn pictures as examples. It was meant to explain to the masses the popular world of aviation and how it all worked. There was never anything top secret or classified and he made sure the Air Force approved each pamphlet before releasing it. A small educational publisher picked up the series and soon *Aviation Basics—The world of science and technology in the skies*, had a small niche following. It allowed Mark to immerse and pursue both engineering and aviation.

It was an unusually warm night in the high desert, known for extreme temperature drops after the sun went down. As he slaved over a diagram on his drafting table Mark's one-and-only fan was pointed in his direction. It was a dissection of a jet engine. The small cabin-like building had wood-paneled walls and carpeted floors. The furniture was clean and simple.

Some might say it was one step up from a trailer park, but to Mark it was beyond anything he had ever had in North Korea. He was waiting for his favorite TV show to start, *Peter Gunn*, on the first real purchase he had made since becoming an American, an RCA Victor CTC-9 console color TV. A knock on the door interrupted his concentration. Mark stepped to the door and paused before reaching for the knob.

"Yes?" he said.

"Mark, it's me, Harry. I need to talk to you right away."

Mark took a breath and unlocked the door. Harry Wells was one of the government's many liaison officers that were part of the team working out of China Lake. Mark couldn't remember what he was responsible for, as the man seemed to just stand in the background and take notes, never actively engaging in the exercises. But Harry had been kind to Mark. Many of the other team members harbored racism against anyone "Oriental." First the Japanese, then the North Koreans, and now the North Vietnamese. They had mostly talked behind his back, but a couple of guys on the team were quite harsh. Harry, however, was undeterred by his heritage and treated him as an equal.

The thirty-eight-year-old blonde, blue-eyed man stepped into Mark's living room with a creased brow and nervousness that spilled through his every pore. He wore green canvas pants and a madras collared shirt. He moved about the room, too worked up to sit.

"Tea, coffee?" Mark asked.

"No, thanks. I don't know how to tell you this, so I'm gonna come right out and say it. I think there is something fishy going on with your publisher."

"What?"

"Your book publisher. I hate to admit it, but I'm a fan of your books. I guess you could call me a secret airplane buff, and as the man responsible for all the BLM land you are using in your training flights, this has been a real dream job for me. And what you did...coming over here with the MiG. That took guts. You're like an American hero...though Korean."

"So, what about my publisher?" Mark asked.

"Oh, yeah. I was reading your book on ailerons and their effect on the trailing edge of each wing. 'The 'aileron,'" Harry quoted from memory, "'French for little wing, is a hinged flight control surface operated in pairs to control the movement of the plane.'"

This guy really was a fan, Mark thought.

"Anywho, I accidently spilled my coffee with a little bit of Baileys, if you know what I mean, on my book. I like to end the day with just a splash, along with some creamer."

Mark interrupted Harry's babblings. "I'd be happy to give you a replacement pamphlet." He was still not sure where this conversation was going, but the guy was taking forever to get to the point.

"No. That's not why I'm here. Once wet, the pages got all see-through and the two diagrams, Figure 3 and Figure 4, when overlapped produced this." He held out his soggy book and moved over to a lamp next to the small plaid couch. The two pages had stuck together and were translucent when held up against the light. Several words seemed much darker than the rest, the overlay creating a zig zag message.

Insert Image Secret Code.jpg

Quiet Bird Real. Specs to Follow as Received. Radar Ineffective. Capable of Mach Flight

Mark pretended surprise. "What on earth?"

"I know, right? This can't be a coincidence. There is something going on," Harry added.

Mark's mind turned at afterburner speed. "Grab a glass of water from my kitchen. I'm going to get more books and a stronger light. Let's see if this is a one-off or something more."

Harry headed for the kitchen. It took him three tries to find the right cupboard before turning the faucet and filling the glass.

Mark grabbed several of his pamphlets and a metal flashlight. He returned and opened the same pamphlet Harry had brought over. Harry spilled some water on the two selected pages and Mark shined his flashlight from below.

"You're right. It's on both books," Mark said.

"Let's try another book."

"Good idea." Mark grabbed the pamphlet on *Take Offs and Landings*. Opening it to a diagram, he handed it to Harry to hold. "Line up the next diagram with this page," he said.

Harry set down his glass and eagerly placed the two pages next to each other. Mark flicked on the flashlight, but instead of placing it under the pages, he swung it as hard as he could on the back of Harry's head. The flashlight bent and the glass lens shattered as Harry's body dropped to the floor unconscious. Mark just stared at the man on the floor, planning his next move.

He cleaned up the room, throwing away the flashlight and the two wet pamphlets. He then squatted next to Harry and went through his pockets. The license in his wallet told Mark where the man lived. The car keys were to a Chevy 3100 pickup.

He loaded Harry into the passenger side of Harry's pickup and drove. Once at Harry's home, he dragged the man into his living room and took a look around. There was a small spill on the carpet and an empty coffee cup on the side table. A bottle of Baileys Irish Cream sat next to it. A moan escaped Harry's lips as he started to move. Mark gripped him around the chest and dragged him into the bathroom. He turned the water on in the tub and placed the rubber stopper in the drain, and then started to undress him. Once naked, Mark pulled his victim up and over into the tub. Harry began to protest as his faculties returned. He struggled and flopped against his foe. With a quick back flick, Harry's head smashed into Mark's nose, sending blood spurting out. They wrestled and squirmed in an ugly twisting brawl. Eye jabs, elbows, knees and water going everywhere. Finally, Mark managed to slam Harry's head against the tub spout and send him back into oblivion. Harry's head was now bleeding into the water and mixing with Mark's own blood. Mark grabbed a washcloth and used it to stem his own flow of blood.

The bathroom was a mess—blood, water, and a broken towel rack. He tidied up and reassembled the towel rack. From the linen closet, he replaced the dirtied towels he had used to clean up. He left the water running and plugged a radio he found from the living room into the bathroom outlet. Then, without emotion, he tossed it into the water of the tub, careful to keep back from the edge. Harry's body immediately went rigid and vibrated to an unseen current. Sparks from both the radio and the plug filled the room with smoke. Mark closed the door behind him satisfied that the staged accident was complete.

He locked the front door and killed the lights, leaving through the back door that he locked behind him. He dashed back around to the front yard and exited the neighborhood. It would be light in a few hours, and the walk back home, staying off the main streets, would take time. The only consolation—his secret was still safe.

Chapter Two

PRESENT DAY – FOUNTAIN PARK – SAINT LOUIS – 8:43 P.M.

The metamorphosis was transcending. Cameron Clark, also referred to as “The Scientist” by his employer, lowered the magnifying glass that had helped him witness every detail of the change. First, the dark-coffee-brown chrysalis wiggled and squirmed until a crack grew across its body. From out of that crack burst a new being soon capable of one of life’s rare skills—flight. Cameron held out his hand and let the creature crawl onto his finger as it pumped blood into its shriveled wings until they filled with life and purpose. Once ready to take flight, Cameron placed the giant silk moth, known as *Lonomia obliqua*, into a specialized moth aviary that allowed the creature to fly, eat, and mate in the never-ending cycle of life.

Cameron appreciated the yellow-brown moth, roughly the diameter of a teacup saucer, but what he most loved was the two-inch larval form of the creature. A leaf-eating machine with the most unique defense system on the planet—urticating bristles that could inject a specialized venom unlike anything else. The caterpillar itself looked brown and ordinary, but the bushy pale green bristles that covered it looked like a forest of baby twig cactuses with little spikes on the end. Each was capable of delivering its toxic formula to anyone unlucky enough to brush against it, or a creature stupid enough to try to eat it. Cameron picked up a small sample dish with one such caterpillar inside. It moved along in an undulating walk that made the bushy green covering wobble. He held it up to his dark brown eye, an eye devoid of emotion. As much as he admired his deadly babies, Cameron held no love for them or anyone. He had a detached psyche that landed solidly on the Asperger syndrome scale. Curiosity and perfection of actions, however, were always on display.

Cameron Clark was average height and looks with buzzed sandy-brown hair and slightly sloped shoulders. He had unusually long ears and an elongated face to match. In a word, he was forgettable, and that was fine by him. Being one of the cleverer assassins in the trade, The Scientist could walk through a room and no one would remember him. It was not just his looks that made him so successful, however, he also had an IQ that was off the charts. He was a true stealth-style assassin and right now his weapon of choice was aptly named—The Assassin Caterpillar.

Four years back, Cameron had taken a trip to the southern part of Brazil in search of a very rare specimen there. He hired a naturalist to guide him on a two-day excursion into the jungles in hopes of photographing some of the jungle’s least common lifeforms. One of his goals was to find an assassin caterpillar. The caterpillar had become something of legend in his mind, ever since he first read about it. The fuzzy little larva was capable of killing in a most diabolical way and was responsible for hundreds of deaths. Medical technicians in Brazil were still working on an antidote with no success yet.

The first day was a hot, muggy affair with a lot of weaving, ducking, and crawling as his naturalist guide was against using a machete when at all possible. The humid, rotting air was overwhelming for the Seattle-born assassin. Eventually they found a clearing for the night and set up two hammocks and a small campfire under a large cashew tree. Cameron was covered in mud and bug bites, despite having continually reapplied his 100% Deet insect repellent. His

guide thought he would likely die from the diethyltoluamide in the repellent rather than the bugs.

They had come across some amazing finds that first day. Cameron reviewed his camera's memory card, stopping and zooming in on a brightly colored poison dart frog. At one point his guide pointed out a golden lion tamarin monkey, and he got a great close-up of an eyelash viper. The night was miserable even with the mosquito netting, and Cameron started to question his decision to venture so far from civilization. This was not to his liking, with every minute seeming like an hour. Eventually exhaustion won out and he drifted off to sleep.

The morning glow signaled the end of what was officially the longest night in his life. A quick breakfast and the two broke camp and started back.

Two hours into their return trip Cameron hit pay dirt. On the back of a large grey tree were dozens of assassin caterpillars. Cameron took many pictures and asked several questions. When he felt like he had learned all he could from his guide, Cameron pulled a knife and ended the man's life without a second thought, sliding the blade between his ribs. He hauled the body into a marshy area and pushed it down with a stick until there was no sign of the naturalist.

Next, he carefully collected all the caterpillars and placed them in a leaf-filled Tupperware container. With a machete in hand, he followed his GPS device and hacked his way out vowing never to come to the jungle again.

His home-built, screened-in aviary was now a gilded cage to one of the deadliest insects on the planet, causing a death that was effectively untraceable in the US. The Scientist returned the assassin caterpillar to its cage and moved up the stairs out of his basement workshop to his kitchen. It was all white, including the dishes. In fact, his entire home was furnished in various shades of white, from the bleached wood floors to the white leather furniture, even the artwork. He pulled a Topo Chico from the refrigerator and sat on the couch nursing the naturally carbonated spring water. His thoughts drifted back to his humble beginnings.

Growing up as a loner had its advantages. As long as you stayed away from the crowds and out of the spotlight, you were invisible. That was particularly important during one's formative years, and it set the pattern and style for everything else that followed. As a young boy obsessed with knowledge and an unnatural love for all things that moved, crawled, or grew, Cameron found his life's passion in the natural sciences at a very young age. It was mankind that was the problem. They hunted, smashed, and ate their way through everything Cameron loved. A virus to nature. High school had brought his most troubled years. As a social outcast, Cameron was left alone to pursue his passions, but trouble always had a way of sniffing him out and pulling him from obscurity. Unlike the typical young psychopath, his total apathy toward living things did not extend to small animals. A psychopath in mind but not deed.

Besides the general ridicule of being a freshman, Cameron's elongated face and ears won him the moniker "Rosie Palm" with the other boys.

"Hey, Rosie! With a face like that the only action you'll ever get is with yourself!"

"How are the blisters, Rosie?"

"Heard you went on a double date. You used both hands!"

It was a painful and humiliating running joke that came out anytime Cameron was spotted. It was as if he had a target painted on his back just above a sign that read "Bully Me."

Cameron was unable to shake the stigma throughout his high school years, but he did have several moments of satisfactory revenge. It started with the girl he thought was the most

beautiful person he had ever seen. Sherri Velsor. She had light brown wavy hair and a slim body and the most perfect smile. She had even flashed it in his direction a few times. But people change, and as she became more popular her attitude towards him shifted dramatically to the point where she joined in with the chorus of insults and barbs. They were only words, and words can't hurt you, could they? Emotional scars consumed Cameron, leaving him two choices, a complete disconnection or to fight back. And there was nothing wrong with a little payback, right?

Cameron went to the local Asian market and bought the biggest fish they had. He cut off its head and placed it in a bucket of water for two days, to let it ripen. It was Friday evening when Cameron carried his experiment onto school grounds and over to locker number A345. It took him several tries to successfully pick the lock and open the swinging door. He placed the rotting head on the back center hook; its dead eyes gawking forward. Monday was a holiday, so it would be three days before its owner found her surprise.

When her locker door swung open Sherri saw the hideous fish face. The smell enveloped her so completely that she turned and puked. Word spread like wildfire that someone hated Sherri Velsor. Even after her locker was pressure washed, the smell lingered. Cameron had not expected such an outcry. The amount of talk and energy spent was intoxicating. Only he knew the true culprit and for some very strange reason, no one suspected him. The suspicions and chatter lasted nearly a month before dwindling. That emboldened Cameron to move things to the next level. He would go after Bruce, the jock who had initially given him his moniker.

As the leading wide receiver in the county, Bruce was assured a college scholarship. One Saturday, he had several scouts coming to see him and a few other teammates. Cameron had taken the time to do his homework, along with some eavesdropping and a bit of snooping on Bruce's Myspace page. It didn't take long to work out a plan. It wasn't perfect, but the odds of success were high. That week, he watched as Bruce moved through his weekly routine around campus. Timing and plotting his movements, Cameron decided that on Friday he would make his move. Last summer he had read *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, and tried to apply one of its teachings: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." He would do just that. Keep it simple and strike without warning.

Clare Dawn High School was a two-level tilt-up style building with gray walls and black trim around rectangular windows. The flight of concrete stairs leading from the English department down to Social Sciences was the longest on campus. With thirty-two steps of hardened concrete, it was perfect for Cameron's needs. He sneaked onto campus Thursday night and spent ten minutes installing two very small screws into the wall on either side of the top step. He touched them up with matching gray paint so that they blended in with their surroundings. One-hundred-pound clear test fishing line was plenty of strength for his needs and was still almost invisible. He tied it to one screw, carefully pulled it down, and then pressed it into one of the parallel grooves of the rubber non-skid strip at the top of the first stairstep. He then routed it back up and looped it once around the second screw on the other side. He rolled up the remaining line and wrapped it around the small accent light that illuminated the step. Satisfied that his contraption would go unnoticed, he exited the campus and hurried home. For the first time in many nights, Cameron slept a full eight hours. Something about his calculated actions gave him a peace he rarely felt.

At 10:30 AM on Friday, Cameron perched himself in the alcove next to the flight of stairs. He leaned over and grabbed the excess fishing line from around the accent light. He wrapped it around his hand and waited. Bruce left his English class and hung outside the door chatting up some of his friends. He was bragging about how he was going to crush his try-out the next day and leave this little town behind. Eventually he said his goodbyes and headed Cameron's way. As he neared the top of the steps Cameron quickly pulled up on the line. The force popped the fishing line up out of the non-skid and brought immediate tension to it just four inches above the floor. Cameron watched from the side of his vision as Bruce went from self-assured and cocky to a scared little boy, his torso going horizontal as he tried and failed to grab the railing. He tumbled awkwardly down the hardened steps, not stopping until he was a motionless blob at the bottom. Cameron quickly removed his fishing line and turned to head in the opposite direction. He desperately wanted to see the aftermath, but that would be too dangerous. He needed to put distance between himself and the incident. He forced himself to take the long way around, walking nice and easy until he eventually made it back to the scene. Two adult teachers were kneeling over Bruce with worried looks on their faces. They were telling the growing mob of students to get back and make room for the paramedics. Cameron stood on his tippy toes to get a look. Bruce was lying on the ground crying, his left leg in an awkward angle. The smile that grew on Cameron's face was straight out of *The Grinch*. *It was an outstanding day!* he thought to himself as his heart leapt in joy before turning and heading to his next class.

Light burned her retina and fovea centralis as her lids fluttered open, and then quickly closed with a shot of pain. Her eyes were caked with dried blood, and her vision was blurry as she tried to adjust to the brightness. An urge to sit up outweighed the dizziness. Stabilizing hands on greasy pavement helped her stay sitting. A slow look around provided no knowledge of her surroundings. She recognized the objects, just not the location. The smell was familiar and not pleasant. She saw a narrow alleyway, a worn and dented overfilled dumpster and several bags of trash upon which she sat. Using her hands for balance, she stood and gathered herself. Inspecting her person, she found fitted navy-blue slacks and a light-blue blouse, both stained and grimy. They did little to place who she was or how she had gotten here. Her shoes were saddle leather with wedge heels. They were scraped up, but new and fashionable. She probed a dried bloody gouge on her head with gentle fingers. It explained the pounding in her brain and the dizziness. She tried to think back, but there was nothing, just snippets of a childhood and some fragments of college life.

She walked on unsteady feet out of the alley using the brick wall for support. The day was young, and few people were out and about. A random selection turned her right, down a well-trodden sidewalk. She moved past a closed cellphone store with a heavy gate locked across the front. Through the bars she could just make out a reflection of a face in the storefront glass. It was familiar, but unknown. *Who am I? How did I get here and where am I?* were just a few of the hundreds of questions that bounced through her muddled mind.

Mid-block, a second right pushed her through the doors of a Starbucks. They were preparing for the day's onslaught. There were two people in line and three partners behind the counter, taking orders and filling them. The smell nearly knocked her off her feet. It was familiar

and desirable, calling to her. She forced herself past the glares and judgements towards her immediate destination.

A voice she didn't recognize but understood called to her, "Restrooms are for customers only! Hey!"

She ignored the voice and moved to the door with a symbol of a half man, half woman on it. Once inside, she closed and locked the door, leaning back against it for support, working up enough courage to finally face the mirror. A hollow face stared back. Her mind began to build a story of what was in the reflection. I am a woman, brunette with brown eyes, maybe five-eight. My clothes look nice but are battered and filthy. I am dirty, hurt, and there is a wound on my head. I have been injured and I can't remember who I am.

The woman stared a bit longer trying to recall and fill in the missing pieces. She checked her pockets and came away with nothing. *Am I recently homeless or did someone provide me with these clothes? No, they feel right to me. These are my own clothes. I think I must have been in an accident. Some kind of trauma or altercation. My shoes are too practical to be in the fashion or corporate world. I must work a lot on my feet. Maybe I am a waitress or car salesman. That makes no sense. I am standing here trying to deduce my past based on a simple reflection in the mirror. I'm a cop or an insurance investigator. Maybe a spy. This is ridiculous. I'm a mess and I stink. That is who I am.*

She turned on the water and started to wash away the blood and grime. Her matted hair, her filthy skin, even the muck under her fingernails. Damp paper towels helped remove the large chunks that still clung to her clothes and after a bit of effort she was feeling better about herself and her looks. One more long look in the mirror and she came to a conclusion. *I don't know who I am.* She left the restroom and headed out of the shop.

"Come in here again like that and I'll call the police."

She flipped him the bird as she closed the door behind her. The sidewalk was still relatively empty. A siren closed in her direction from the left. It made her skittish. *Am I on the lam? Lam? Who uses that word?* She would take no chances and ducked out of sight as a police car with flashing lights flew past. Quickly jogging across the street and moving in the opposite direction of the police car, she cut across the next block and saw a city park. An empty bench in a more obscure area called to her. She sat to collect her thoughts. *I need a plan.* Wandering lost around a town was not a plan.

The park was coming to life as joggers, dog walkers, and strollers began their daily rituals. The sun was already announcing a hot day as the humidity index started to climb. She watched the passersby move in all directions, a daily pattern that was the lifeblood of the city. A glance at her hands revealed a thin white line on her ring finger. Had she recently lost or taken off a wedding ring? *Am I married? Divorced?* A rift in the morning's symphony caught her eye. Two men dressed in gangster chic, got out of a brown van and started to patrol the neighborhood. They were looking for something or someone.

The Scientist adjusted his black-framed non-prescription glasses and stepped up the stairs to the lobby, his days as the bullied Cameron Clark long behind him. The glasses had specialized lenses that when viewed from an angle made it difficult for others to see his eyes. That included cameras as well. It forced him to move his neck more as he scanned left and right, but later identification would prove most difficult. A cool blast of airconditioned air

greeted him as he pushed his way through the revolving door, pulling his carry-on along with him. He wore a pilot's uniform with only one bar on the shoulder making him a junior officer. The bushy dark curly wig was making his head sweat, and that, in turn, made it itch. The chair he had scouted previously was empty. He claimed it, knowing the security camera was blocked by a Grecian column.

His path to this moment had been carefully planned down to the last detail. Starting with his first overt act with a rotted fish head back in high school to the first man he had killed with antifreeze. It had been a journey with purpose and intention. His life had been a series of molding events that had dropped him into the business of eliminating the worst of the worst—man. College had allowed him to learn and embrace his love of the earth. Life had taught him the horror that is humankind. Why the word “kind” was attached, he would never understand.

He had met The Handler, or actually she had met him at an entrepreneur's convention in the California mountains. She had been intrigued by his ideas and passions. In time, she had shown him a world where he could thrive. It allowed him to use his superior intellect and control his urges by giving him an outlet for them. Killing other humans was the fuel that drove him forward fulfilling his existence. She had encouraged his passions and even financed his training in areas he had never thought important. But her most important contribution was marketing, something Cameron never understood. It was she who had named him The Scientist, saying it would give him anonymity and a certain *je ne sais quoi*, making him more intriguing and ultimately more valuable than a guy named Cameron Clark.

Now he had a steady flow of jobs, an outlet for his obsessions, and all the money he needed.

The Scientist placed over-the-ear headphones on his head and connected them to his phone, a sure way to avoid engagement with anyone in a crowd. Instead of music, the headphones were specially built to amplify and cancel sounds in the room. They allowed the wearer to tune in to conversations by adjusting the four built-in omnidirectional microphones by turning them on or off, thus engaging the chosen directional noise and cancelling the rest. The system ran on a simple phone app with a graphic circle and a highlighted pointer that could be moved around the circle like a dial. The Scientist powered up the headphones and listened to the cacophony of sounds that filled the space, all overlapping and blending together. He used his finger on his smartphone's screen to engage the system. All ambient sound fell away, and a very specific sound replaced it, the simple ding of an elevator car. He moved the pointer around the circle slowly, listening to various people and groups. He closed his eyes as he concentrated on each one, slowly circumnavigating the lobby of the grand hotel without looking.

Well, I don't mind if you do...Someone will surely be interested in such an ideal property...Would you like some company tonight? You look lonely to me...Tommy, get over here and stop touching everything...Can I help you, sir? I'm here to check in. The name's Stanisloff. I'm going to go up and check your room, Congressman. Justin will watch your back here until I give the all-clear.

The Scientist sat up. He checked his app and could see that he was tuned into a conversation behind him and to the left, at his eight o'clock. Casually, as if he had all the time in the world he lowered the headphones around his neck, stood, and walked to the elevator area with his phone in hand. He leaned against the wall as if sending a text but was actually opening

his next program. Ever so carefully he risked a glimpse at the mark. Just a second, but long enough for The Scientist to fix the position on his target. He slipped on a flesh-colored glove that, once in place, mimicked his human hand. Removing a small glass vial from his pocket, he used his gloved hand to carefully pick up the caterpillar inside, holding it between his thumb and forefinger with the spines outward.

The lobby was a grand affair with large columns and a domed roof. There was a generous amount of marble and a complementary beige paint. The Scientist moved, head down, as if he was captivated by something on his phone, pulling his carry-on behind him like a lonely caboose across the patterned stone floor. He kept the phone in his left hand, with his thumb and index fingers holding the caterpillar just above it. His eyes were down on the screen as he walked. The image on the screen was a live video of what was in front of him, beamed via Bluetooth from a hidden camera on the headphones still around his neck. It allowed The Scientist to walk along any designated path while seemingly lost in his phone, never needing to look up. The image on the screen showed two men in suits standing off to the side of the lobby. The older one seemed impatient, and the younger man had his eyes continuously scanning the occupants of the room. Bodyguard. There was an obvious bulge under his coat.

The woman suddenly felt vulnerable. She watched the wanna-be gangsters searching the surrounding area for someone. *What if they are looking for me?* she thought. A quick slouch on the park bench lowered her as she looked for a place to hide. The air was ripe with the scent of freshly cut grass. The sounds of the city coming to life was carried on the gentle breeze as her eyes darted back and forth with indecision, the knock on her head pounding in time with her racing heart.

She watched the two men as they moved in a pattern designed to eliminate possibilities. Up one street and back down another. Each time they moved in her direction, she could feel a surge of adrenaline coursing through her body. After clearing the streets, they made their way into the park. It was a half-block affair with open areas and a path that wound through several gardens and a few mature trees. Off to one side was a fountain that had a marble Pegasus spouting water from its mouth.

She stood and walked toward the fountain, keeping her head down as she went. About fifty feet from the flying horse, she noticed a change in the hunters' posture. They were looking in her direction and one was pointing.

Like a spooked deer, she turned and ran, panic fueling her flight. The men gave chase, each determined to get there first. As she left the park, a brown panel van screeched to a stop in front of her. The driver jumped from the vehicle and reached for something metallic under his shirt—a gun.

A surge shot through her body as instinct took over. Using her right foot she jumped at the man who was reaching for his gun. She landed full weight on his chest with her left foot, knocking him back before he could bring the gun to bear. Her momentum carried the man into the side of his van, his head leaving a nice dent in the sheet metal. She used his body as a ramp to vault herself onto the roof. Once on top, she continued over, dropping in a roll safely back down on the other side. Before her assailants could react, she dashed across the street and down an alley. The three men reorganized and gave chase. But their target was nowhere in sight.

Bobby Carlyle of the US House of Representatives was an up-and-comer that had been making a lot of news lately. He was a moderate who was pushing hard for the abolishment of special interest in government. It was a message that played well in the media and public eye, but Washington was too attached to the teat of this unholy cow to let him have his way. Power and money were perfect bedfellows in the cycle of political life, and power almost always got its way.

Carlyle butted heads and intimidated colleagues wherever he could to forward his agenda. He wielded the press as his own personal messiah and connected to millions through social media. It gave him leverage, but not security. Making enemies in politics was a given; accepted, really. It was how you controlled the public in concert with your allies that was real power. But if you ever crossed them, they would all turn on you.

The handsome fifty-six-year-old native Philadelphian was a full six feet tall with broad shoulders and a strong chin. He was built for politics. His wife Cassandra and two kids had been slow to adapt to the D.C. lifestyle. She was the yin to his yang and worked hard to stay out of the public eye. Every other month, Carlyle travelled to his home city for a couple days to work on his other passion: a non-profit benefiting foster families. It was a good cause and had won him many votes every year. Growing up in a broken and dated system himself, Carlyle had gone on to champion reforms and protections for both the parents and children in the system. He worked tirelessly to make what he believed was a better America. Critics be damned.

Now he was feeling the tension that always dogged him when he was running behind schedule. It was one of his pet peeves—be on time or early for every meeting. He waited in the lobby of his favorite Philadelphia hotel, The Rittenhouse, anxiously awaiting the all-clear. He headed for the elevator unconcerned with the procedure the bodyguards required.

The Scientist continued head down, buried in his phone as he moved through the lobby on a perpendicular path that would pass by the congressman with a yard to spare. Nothing suspicious here. The Scientist could see the bodyguard eyeballing him from a few steps behind the senator, but the man quickly dismissed him as a threat. Just another working-class pilot on his way to or from the airport. When he was less than three feet away, The Scientist slightly skewed his approach. The bodyguard instantly reacted and moved to intercept, but before he could The Scientist bumped into his target. He watched as his fingers wiped the back of the caterpillar across the congressman's hand and then quickly pulled back, just as the bodyguard pushed him to the side.

The Senator reacted as if shocked by a doorknob on a dry day, quickly pulling his hand away. "Hey!" He backed up.

"So sorry, please forgive me, wasn't paying attention," The Scientist said, as he stepped back and looked up with a repentant face.

"Watch where you're going," the bodyguard called out, unsure if he needed to pull his gun.

"My bad," The Scientist replied, with his phone hand raised in supplication, hiding the bug behind it. He quickly moved off and away with the eyes of the bodyguard boring into the back of his head.

Congressman Carlyle rubbed the back of his hand and looked down. *What was that?* There was no scratch or cut. His skin looked normal.

"You okay, sir?" the bodyguard asked.

"Yes. I'm fine, just got a static shock I guess, no big deal. Another citizen not paying attention to where they're going. That's why I'm here to help them find the right path."

"One hundred percent, sir," the bodyguard replied.

Congressman Carlyle gave his "yes man" bodyguard a sour expression. "Let's head up to the room; I have a lot on my plate today. I'm done waiting for the all-clear."

What the congressman did not know was that, three days from now, he would experience flu-like symptoms, and shortly thereafter, he would be dead.

Why am I being hunted? Who wants me dead? Am I important or just yesterday's trash needing to be taken out? And how in the hell did I just take out that guy with a gun? The thoughts circled in her head as she fought to catch her breath behind a late model SUV in the parking structure she has dashed into. Images from her past popped by like a broken projector on repeat, but her memories were still lost to her. *Who am I?* A slim view of the street through concrete and sheet metal was her only security. Footsteps approached and then passed as an older woman with a large purse and coffee mug walked by. She let a breath go that she had been holding and tried to calm herself.

The sound of an engine slowly moving in the parking structure reverberated off the hard surfaces. It was coming her way. Carefully standing on the balls of her feet she prepared herself to run or hide. Between the parked cars, she could finally make out the vehicle. It was the brown van, and it was slowly moving throughout the complex. They would be coming her way any second. She crouched behind the SUV trying to make herself invisible, closing her eyes for a moment in hope, as the engine noise drew closer.

A door abruptly opened and closed. Followed by the roar of a V-8 starting up. Before she knew what was happening, the large SUV she was hiding behind started backing out. A call from the driver startled her and didn't go unnoticed by the men in the van. "Hey! What are you doing hiding in front of my car?"

Two gangsters jumped from the van and ran in her direction. She hurdled the guy wires separating her from the level below and rolled with the jarring impact onto the concrete. Once back on her feet her ankle protested, forcing her to limp-run out of the structure. She could hear the van driver yelling at the woman in the SUV to get out of the way and a small smile crossed her face as the woman gave it right back to the van driver. Her real problem was the two men in hot pursuit who had jumped over the cable-wire railing just behind her.

With her ankle protesting, they were quickly gaining. Her flight instinct took over and she ran blindly into the street, just trying to get away. The sudden screech of tires turned her attention as a delivery truck hit her from the side, launching her like a trampoline. There was a sudden silence as the world turned and spun in slow motion followed by the hard reality of an asphalt impact. Then nothing at all.

Chapter Three

LAGUNA BEACH, CALIFORNIA – 11:09 A.M.

Atlantis was a driven woman with the ability to gain people's empathy when none was warranted. She had little regard for others and held to a strong belief system that governed her actions. As an atheist and confirmed bachelorette, life was all about getting everything you could for yourself. She put 'I' first and all else be damned. After several years of myopic focus on her career, she used that income to build a life filled with comfort. A simple lifestyle that appealed to her desires built around her expensive tastes.

Her business meant everything to her, and she followed a simple adage taken from the only religious verse she had ever agreed with—Isaiah 22:13: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." It was literally the basis for her entire life. The fact that she was a death dealer was seen as only a means to an end. It gave her the same satisfaction as buying a new handbag. Death was a growing business niche in which she had excelled. For the right price anyone was a viable target and with the talent she had carefully developed, the outcome was assured.

Atlantis had prospered from the demise of presidents, CEO's, spouses, even child heirs, but she had always held the line at pets. No animal, no matter how much money was left to it in a trust, deserved that fate. When it came to people however, no name was out of bounds and once an agreement was reached, you could set your watch to the agreed time of their demise.

At forty-two, she was young enough to not have to fight to maintain her figure, but old enough to know that was coming to an end. She was one of the younger handlers in the business with a ruthless streak that had quickly earned her an exemplary reputation.

Her mix of Asian and European ethnicity gave her an exotic appearance that fit into almost any international crowd. At five-foot-four and only 108 pounds she was slight, with jet-black hair held back in a simple ponytail most times and dark liquid-oil eyes to match. The tail of a dragon tattoo could be seen on her neck as it just peeked out of the heather-gray collar of her fitness top. It had open sides and a mesh back to match the fitted joggers capped with white and canvas sneakers.

Her blanched-almond skin was smooth and flawless, but her real beauty was her intelligence. She was an ingenious planner and strategist, developing a unique and secure business model that had gone unnoticed by authorities.

Atlantis ran only two assassins, but they were prolific. Both very different in their approach and methodologies. She had given each a unique handle that matched their specialty.

The Encyclical was named after the papal letters sent to bishops in the ancient Roman Catholic Church and was used for sending a message. When you wanted someone dead in a public or obvious way, he was the perfect choice. Always messy and always deadly.

The Scientist was the clear choice when there was a need to leave no sign of foul play. Clever and ever so subtle in his methods, not one hit had been determined as anything other than accidental or unexplained or was a clear blame to the intended, like a wife or partner.

Atlantis worked off a website named *Lilies4everyoccasion.com*. It was a simple and colorful site that allowed you to choose your color and arrangement, all sold by the dozen. For those who knew how the site worked, it was easy to order a hit, and for those who did not they received their flowers a few days later as ordered.

Each dozen lilies represented a hit. There were two different arrangements available, loose flowers or in a vase. Loose flowers were for sending a message and in a vase was for subtlety. The colors related to pricing starting at red for twenty dollars all the way up to white for one hundred dollars. Buyers placed their order and followed up with an electronic deposit in her Isle of Mann bank account, adding four zeros to the amount. Each purchase required delivery instructions including name, photo, and address. There were no posted instructions, and knowledge of how to order came from a very closed word-of-mouth network.

Any additional negotiations took place in the comments section of the site where you were then redirected to a live chat page. Ten seconds after you typed your message it auto deleted, making it very secure. For those who found or used the site as a flower source the amount paid told Atlantis exactly what to do. She had a small floral service that fulfilled the orders giving her an additional modest income that covered her business costs. It was simple and highly profitable with low overhead and high margins and minimal visibility.

Atlantis set her half-finished caramel macchiato on a rustic table and sat on a neighboring over-stuffed chair. She pulled the Tootsie Pop from her mouth and set it on the small wax paper square in which it was originally wrapped. The room was modern with a bold use of color. Like a flower garden, every color had its presence. Teal chairs with yellow pillows, sky blue walls and a dusty rose couch. There was a moss green rug set upon a gray slate floor. It would be too much for some, but it made Atlantis happy to be in the room.

Laguna Beach, California was the right mix of money and anonymity. Atlantis spent a good portion of her time in a beach house built on the tip of a peninsula with a 220-degree view of the water. The house was three stories high with a single gated entrance. A sheer cliff to rocks and water below surrounded the rest of the property. She had picked it up for a killer price back in the real estate slump and it had soared in value since.

Placing her laptop, phone, and wallet in the basket of her pink electric beach cruiser, Atlantis opened the gate at her driveway and coasted into town. The sun was up and warming the blacktop as the cool salty ocean breeze countered its effect.

Morning Session was a petite café on Pacific Coast Highway that catered to tourists. It had an ever-evolving collection of patrons and employees. The owners had decorated the place in beach casual, embracing retail's trendy over-decorated look.

Atlantis selected a small table in the back and set up her laptop. She connected to her site through an encrypted VPN that cloaked her IP and address. The prearranged time was in five minutes, just enough time to get her order in.

The purchase request had come in yesterday, and after a bit of due diligence on her part, she had marked the order as pending. She recalled the issue at hand. The order had been for a dozen loose orange lilies, but after some research she had found the price of \$300,000 too low for the complexity of getting to the target. It was a man of means.

She opened her site's chat room and typed a question mark.

A moment later a question mark returned. This simple protocol ensured both parties understood the topic of the chat. Within a few seconds, both marks disappeared from the page.

Atlantis replied with: *Yellow would be more appropriate for your occasion. There are many hurdles to the perfect venue.*

There was a pause. She leaned back and watched her text disappear, and then nothing. She let out a sigh and started to close her laptop but stopped when letters popped up.

Yes, yellow would be a better choice, thank you.

Her lips turned upward. The client had accepted her counter of \$500,000. She typed an account number for the deposit and finished by closing her computer just as a waitress brought her order. She would now have both her assets on jobs. The Encyclical was in Texas, and she would send The Scientist to Miami. She unwrapped a purple Tootsie Pop she took from her purse and popped it into her mouth. It was shaping up to be a great day.

Soft beeping called her back to the light as her eyelids fluttered open. Bright white shocked her whole system as she waited for her squinting eyes to adjust to their surroundings. White ceiling, matching walls, and medical equipment. It was a hospital room. The aroma of chemicals, familiar and haunting. She had been in one before. She tried to sit up and immediate pain shot through her body. Her arm was in a sling and there were many bandages everywhere. She felt groggy and could still only remember her recent past and snippets of her history. A nurse entered her room and appraised her. "You're up. That is good news."

"Where are we? What happened to me?"

"You're in DC, dear. You've heard the term, *hit by a truck*? That was you."

She searched her fragile memory. "Oh yeah."

"My name is Polly and you are in Howard University Hospital." The nurse waited for a reply. When none was forthcoming, she pressed a bit harder. "And you are?"

A twinkling of fear shot across her eyes as she tried to remember, but there was nothing. "I can't remember."

The nurse nodded kindly. "It's not uncommon to have some level of amnesia after the kind of head trauma you've experienced. Try to get some rest and we'll try again later." She tucked the sheet back around her patient.

A second after the nurse left, a man in street clothes opened the door to her room and stepped inside, appraising the situation. He tried a smile, but it was clear he was not well versed in the practice. His suit screamed Men's Warehouse and his shoes were well worn. The eyes said lack of real sleep and his voice said chain smoker.

"I'm Detective Gasser and I'd like to ask you a few questions. The nurse tells me you either don't remember your name or you are not willing to share that information. So I'll skip to a few preliminary questions and come back tomorrow to see if your memory is any better. Plus, I'll have your fingerprint report back by then, so we won't have to play any games. Something I'm not a big fan of."

He pulled the only chair in the room over next to the bed and sat on the peach upholstery. "The driver of the delivery truck said you ran right in front of him, like he wasn't there. I have to ask..." He paused to find the right words, but just blurted out the question. "Were you trying to end your troubles on the bumper of some innocent?"

The question took her by surprise and a flash of anger built. "Just because I can't remember my name or my past doesn't make me suicidal or crazy."

"And just because you say that doesn't make it true," he countered.

The signs of an overworked and underpaid professional cop hung on him like a sandwich board. He had neither the time nor the desire to be in the room. After all, people were dying all around the city. Why did he get an attempted suicide?

"Okay. So, why did you jump in front of the truck?" He looked her over with a judging eye.

"I didn't jump," she replied.

The detective held his palms up. "Hey, I have to ask. Why did you run in front of the truck?"

"I was being chased by three low level criminals."

This response brought his eyes up off his notebook to look for signs of deception by the possible suspect. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

"They drove a beat-up brown van, and wore gangster chic clothes that were meant to advertise, not hide, their gang affiliation. They were young, in their early twenties. Two were Hispanic and the driver of the van was white. Had a lightning bolt tattoo on the side of his face." She gestured toward the right side of her face.

"That is fairly descriptive. Why were they chasing you?"

She tilted her head at the question. She had no idea and shook her head absently. "I'm feeling extremely exhausted. Can we pick this up later? Everything hurts." It wasn't a lie but a convenient coincidence.

The detective nodded slowly and stood. The woman did look seriously beat up. He slid the chair back against the wall and turned to leave. "I'll be back tomorrow and I'll expect you to be more helpful," he tossed out, as the door closed behind him.

The view was astonishing. Four hundred-seventy feet up a glass elevator ride to the geo deck observation level. The iconic Reunion Tower, locally known as *The Ball*, is a 561-foot-high observation tower with restaurants and tourist activities that gave visitors 360-degree views of downtown Dallas.

The Encyclical picked at his garlic chicken sandwich that was half eaten, not because the Cloud Nine Café didn't make a great garlic chicken sandwich, but because his mind was far away from his meal. He checked his watch and paid the bill, leaving a modest tip. The café was not too crowded today. Instinctively, he scanned each diner, adding the face to his memory bank. Should they show up in his path again, he would do something about it.

The Encyclical was an olive-skinned man in his late twenties with a scruffy beard over a chiseled handsome face. He kept his wavy hair just off his shoulders. His ubiquitous sunglasses and shoulder bag suggested a celebrity look-alike. He excelled at the I'm-better-than-you attitude and had no time for humanity in general. Even his clothes said I can afford what most of you can't. He was an island unto himself with a strong sense of self-worth and a grab-what-you-can-when-you-can mentality. A perfect fit for Atlantis' team.

Wandering to the observation deck a few feet away, he stopped at a collection of free high-powered telescopes lining the glass-domed panels that opened out to the city. He selected a predetermined one and adjusted the focus and view to his liking. He watched as a man that ran on a very specific schedule pulled his car out of the A parking structure. It was a British-racing-green Bentley Mulliner GT Number 9, a limited edition two-door coupe that was loaded with technology and craftsmanship. A faint number nine was etched into the front grill giving a nod to the manufacturer's racing heritage.

The Encyclical watched as the vehicle merged into traffic and cruised up to a destination less than a mile away. He lowered the telescope, satisfied that the mark was truly a hostage to his schedule. This would make eliminating him all the more easy. He went to the elevator and hit the button that would take him to the ground floor, and mentally walked through his plan.

Texas was a state known for relaxed gun laws, and with that came additional freedoms that you would never have in California or New York. He would use these laws to his advantage. He let his thoughts turn to the freedoms that were slowly being eroded across this great country, freedoms that were easily given up for a false sense of security. Safety and security were a mirage. No government could truly protect you as an individual. It could make laws and try to enforce them, but if the masses turned against its leaders or even a segment of the population, they would hold no sway. Personal safety and security was your own responsibility.

A young couple entered the elevator. They stood hand-in-hand each wearing the glow two people in love seemed to radiate. He pondered the emotion, knowing it was attributed to a mere chemical imbalance in the brain. Real love, devotion, and commitment were just words used by advertisers and movie producers to illicit a response. The thought almost made him laugh out loud and he had to turn away to hide the mockery on his face.

She woke with a start. The room was dark, and the only illumination came from the machines to her left. A moment's confusion faded as she assessed her situation. Her memory had come flooding back. Her past—growing up in San Diego County along the Pacific Ocean. Her parents, friends, adulthood. The struggles and successes of her life, everything. Her career with the FBI, and even her name—Codi Sanders. She sat up.

The first thing that struck her was the hospital room. She hated them. Time to check out. She pulled her feet to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. That's when she noticed the handcuff. It attached her right wrist to the bed frame. She was a person of interest in some kind of crime. That would never fly. She pulled the IV out of her arm and used the metal tip to pick the lock on the cuffs. In the closet were her street clothes, still filthy and blood-stained. It was the one thing she still had no memory of. *What had happened to her; what had she done?* With one arm in a sling and every muscle protesting, she awkwardly dressed herself. Carefully using the wall for support, she left the room, every step a painful reminder of the three thugs who had put her here.

As she exited the hospital, an older man, dressed like a college professor from the sixties, was waiting on the empty sidewalk. He was illuminated by an orange streetlight that highlighted a first-rate comb-over.

"Hi," she said to him. "I just got released and realize I don't have my cellphone. Would it be okay if I borrowed yours for a quick call to my brother so he can come and get me?"

"Sure, little lady." He handed her his phone with a kind smile.

She turned and dialed, listening to the rings, followed by a sleepy voice.

"Strickman."

The sound of Codi's partner, Special Agent Joel Strickman, allowed her shoulders to finally relax. She had been so lost and confused, but her confidence came flooding back.

"Hello?"

"Joel!"

"Codi? How's your three-day weekend going?"

The words focused Codi on her recent past, but the memory of leaving work on Friday evening faded into nothingness. "I might be in trouble, and I definitely need your help."

"What do you need me to do?"

Codi gave Joel her location, and then returned the phone to the helpful citizen and stepped back into the shadows to wait for him to arrive. The thin white line on her ring finger now completed her memories. She was engaged to Dr. Matt Campbell, a brilliant scientist working for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and somehow she had lost her engagement ring. Apparently, this was a weekend she would never fully remember.

The home he had rented through Vrbo under a false name was an older 1960's home with a garage in the back. The paint was new and the home nicely furnished, the owner knowing full well the power of reviews. It had taken him all of thirty seconds to pick the lock on the garage used to store the owner's crap, and set up a small workshop inside, hoping to hide his actions from all. There were wooden shelves holding long-forgotten items along one wall and a few rusted tools for the gardener on another.

Grenades in Texas, as in all states, were illegal, but non-lethal smoke grenades were not. The Encyclical had picked up two at the Texas Machine Gun and Firearms store in Fort Worth. He had worn a specialized hat for the occasion that had several hidden IR LED's installed in the brim. The small but powerful IR LEDs produced an infrared (IR) light that was invisible to the naked eye, but blinded security cameras. Using false identification and his special hat, he would be nothing but a vague memory if anyone came asking. The shop mostly catered to government agencies but did a strong business with preppers and patriots. Next, he had stopped by a

hardware store for a few additional items. The whole trip had taken him through lunch, and he was starving by the time he returned.

He laid the smoke grenades out on a table in the garage, along with a sandwich and a Coke. He began to carefully dissect both. The smoke grenades looked like pewter soda cans with a pull ring and lever mounted on the top. He unscrewed the top pin and fuse assembly while chewing a mouthful of sandwich. Using an awl, he dug out the starter and the filler mixture packed inside the canister. When the canister was empty The Encyclical refilled it with cordite taken from fifty high-velocity thirty-ought-six rifle cartridges. Once the cordite was packed into the canister, he replaced the ignition assembly. After a quick gulp of the cold soda, he focused on the next step—installing two hundred 3/32-inch steel ball bearings. He glued a hundred to the outside of each canister with JB weld. Finally, he wrapped the whole thing in FiberFix tape. The end result was a lumpy black cylinder about the size of a can of green beans.

Once both homemade grenades were finished, along with his lunch, The Encyclical removed his gloves and stepped back. They were beautiful and as lethal as any real hand-grenades, all made from easily obtainable items. His next task would be a test.

He pulled the gloves from his hands, placed the grenades in a shopping bag and closed the garage door, locking it behind him. He estimated that the dangerous part of the blast radius would be around fifteen feet. After that, death could not be guaranteed. He would need to get close.

The Encyclical stepped back into the house and opened his file on the target. He would need to find the perfect time and place to make his new toy a success. The buyer on this job wanted to make a statement. He could accomplish just that. He would take out the man and his status symbol.

Danzo Perez rubbed both hands across his face as he tried to clear his head. Hiring and navigating HR was the toughest part of running a burgeoning criminal organization. The thirty-six-year-old crime boss adjusted his black tie set against a white shirt, his trademark look.

He had built his operation in and around DC, dividing it into three divisions. A small gang of purse snatchers and pickpockets delivered their ill-gotten goods to a predesignated location. Said location would change every few months. He would then use the personal information and keys they collected to have a break-in crew hit the homes and offices of those people they had stolen from. And finally, he sold the personal and banking information to a group that specialized in identity theft and credit card cloning. His set-up was small but profitable, and he had been extra careful to stay under the radar of the authorities. He knew full well that if you got too big and profitable you were asking for a takeover or a takedown, so he stayed small and mobile.

Danzo was currently working out of the first floor of a condemned building. He had set up a mobile hot spot for WIFI and a few tables fashioned from giant wire spools with mismatched chairs. There was an ice chest cooler for a fridge and a bathroom that still had running water. The whole operation could be packed up and moved in minutes. He had bigger plans for the future, but they would have to wait until he was big enough to pay for his safety. And once you had a few key policemen in your pocket, you could afford to be more public.

He was a Cuban-born “wet foot” immigrant with dark wavy hair and an unpredictable attitude. At five-foot-eleven he was taller than most in his organization. He used his ever-present dour expression to help maintain control over the others.

His parents had made the crossing when he was just five and he still remembered the ordeal. Days in the hot sun with no water or food. The jury-rigged flotilla was overcrowded and sat low in the water. Any swell that came by would wash over the deck sending bodies into the sea. It was a large, unexpected wave that had taken his mother. One moment she had her arms wrapped around young Danzo and was whispering a prayer, and the next moment she was gone. That had turned him away from two things in life—water and religion. He would never own a boat or step foot in a church.

He and his father struggled to make a life in Miami before lymphoma took his father away as well. At age eight, Danzo had gone to work for one of the many drug lords that loved to use minors to move their product. Now he was the boss of his own organization, honed and educated by the hardest and darkest minds.

His immediate problem now, however, was that three of his best guys who worked the street had robbed an FBI agent, and he wasn't quite sure how to put that genie back in the bottle.

Two nights ago, Diaz, Garcia, and Rodo, “The Three Amigos” were robbing a man who had stepped out the back door of an upscale bar into the alley to make a call. Diaz and Garcia quickly surrounded and relieved him of all his possessions while Rodo stayed behind to keep an eye out. A woman followed shortly after the man. This was too easy. They were lining up to be robbed. But she was different. Instead of cowering before them, she stepped in their direction calling out. “Hey, we don't want any trouble. Just take what you want and go on your way.”

Before Diaz and Garcia could engage her, Rodo hit her on the head from behind with a small bat he liked to carry in the front of his jeans for multiple reasons. The woman dropped and hit the pavement headfirst without so much as a twitch.

“Whoa, bro, you killed her!”

“That was gangsta.”

The man being robbed used the distraction to run for his life, leaving his possessions behind. The boys circled the body of the woman. Diaz kicked her to see if she was really dead. Nothing. They hurriedly removed all of her valuables as panic took over. Thinking the woman was deceased, they tossed the body behind a dumpster and ran for their van.

The real problem came when they got back to the boss. An FBI badge was found in her purse. The boss lost his mind and fired them on the spot. He gave the woman's belongings back to them and gave them twenty-four hours to get out of town. Killing an FBI agent would bring his whole world crashing down.

The Three Amigos took it upon themselves to go back and get the body, and then dispose of it. That would surely get them back in with the boss. The problem was, by the time they got there, the body was gone. An angry assaulted FBI agent was worse than a dead one. This Fed could ID them.

They had done a sweep of the area, and with a bit of luck found her in the park. They gave chase, which resulted in a second failure. Now The Three Amigos were actually thinking about giving up and really leaving town, when lady luck smiled down on them. The FBI agent had run right in front of a truck and been smashed, dead. Now there wasn't any evidence

linking their involvement. They were free and clear. It was what Danzo would have called making your own luck.

"You sure she was dead?" Danzo asked, as he rounded the wire cable spool he used for a desk. The abandoned building had once been a printing press, but now was an assemblage of peeling paint and rusted pipes.

"Oh, for sure, boss. That truck pancaked her on the street, and it had nuthin' to do with us."

"Did either of you stick around to make sure she was dead?"

"No. But there was no way she was ever getting up again."

Danzo scratched his chin. "Okay. Dead fed, no connection. You got lucky. What did you do with her belongings?"

"Ah..."

"They're in the van," Rodo said.

"Get rid of them. This never happened. *Understand?*"

All three nodded vigorously.

"Now get out of my sight before I change my mind."