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April 14, 2001

SHERRI DAVIS APPROACHED THE ENTRYWAY, already regretting her decision. After filling out paperwork and release forms for thirty minutes, she hid behind the filthy curtain covering the doorway, the knot in her belly growing tighter. She pulled a small section of the worn fabric to the side. Colored lights blinked rapidly, and several spotlights locked on the mirrored ball above the stage, creating hundreds of dancing reflections around the large room.

"It doesn't hurt, ya know," a voice said over the loud music.

Turning her head, Sherri spied a girl in her late teens standing next to her.

"You look nervous. It's your first time, isn't it?"

"Yes," Sherri said, releasing the curtain. In the dark hallway, Sherri could barely make out the girl's features, though her heavy eyelashes and straight black hair were clearly prominent. It was the young girl whose locker was next to hers.

"It's not like sex. Doesn't hurt the first time."

Sherri nodded. "Got any advice?"

"Have fun sweetie, that's my advice. Go out there and relax. You'll do fine."

"Relax. Right."

"Honey, once those assholes hand you a twenty to sit on their lap, you'll relax," the girl said. "Now get on out there and bring home the bacon," the girl said as she patted her on the rear. Sherri noticed the pat was a little too soft and lingered a little too long before the girl retreated toward the stage.

Sherri sighed heavily, her hands pressing the pleats of her skirt. She

cupped her breasts for a quick adjustment and pulled her shoulders back. The transition from the dark hallway was dramatic. Mist spewed from the smoke machine, burning her eyes, and her ears pulsed as the deep bass vibrated through the speakers. Her steps were short and deliberate, as if she had a choice in these five-inch stiletto heels. She meandered between the tables, dodging a waitress carrying a tray full of beers.

The girl who spoke to her, nineteen at most, took the stage like a veteran and danced around the pole while a variety of clientele watched her every move. The music made her head hurt. Sherri scanned the crowd. Unable to see the two men she was looking for, she worried she might be wasting her time.

“Hey, baby,” an overweight, bald drunk said as he reached out and tried to grab her arm.

“Not tonight, sweetie,” Sherri replied, pulling away.

While she looked the part—plaid miniskirt and a white button-down tied in front of her push-up bra—she wasn’t acting the part. She sensed her awkward movements through the bar. Relax.

Standing by the DJ booth, she tapped her foot to the music and rhythmically swayed her body. Sherri closed her eyes and started a slow, seductive dance. Her hips swayed like sea oats blowing in the ocean breeze. It didn’t take long before she noticed the men nearby stared at her instead of the stage, waving twenty dollar bills at her. Feeling more confident, she moved around the bar again. She had to work fast. Her stage debut was in half an hour.

After a couple minutes meandering through the crowded bar and refusing three more requests for lap dances, she saw the first subject. He had come out of the men’s room and returned to a table located away from the stage.

His name was Ahmed Alnami, a Saudi Arabian living in and moving around the United States. Now he was in Pensacola, sitting at a table with his partner, Saeed Alghamdi, who was getting a lap dance from one of the girls. Alnami sat at the table where he took a long swig of his beer and flashed his partner a smile. Weren’t these two supposed to be devout Muslims? Why were they here?

Sherri approached the table. She leaned toward Alnami, her breasts at eye level, right in front of him. He stared in her eyes, looking fearful. Not the fear of danger. The innocent fear, like a teenage boy about to lose his virginity. “Hey, big boy,” she said, “are you lonely?” Alnami

continued to stare, clearly unsure what to do.

Sherri smiled and pointed at her eyes. "Honey, you need to change your focus from here, to here," she said as she moved her hands to her breasts. Alnami's face beamed.

"Yes, please to sit," he said in broken English. Sherri sat on his lap. Her breasts were at his eye level. No wonder he was smiling—a blond Amazon had landed in his lap. She reached over and ran her hand through his hair. It was oily and hadn't been washed for a while. Wiping her hand on the back of his shirt, she cringed, yet forced a weak smile. Alnami lunged his face forward and buried it in her breasts. Sherri pushed him back. She wanted to punch him, but that would undo all she'd accomplished.

"Settle down, big boy, we need to get to know each other first."

"This is what I want," he said, pointing at his partner, whose lap dancer was grinding aggressively into him.

"Oh, you'll get that and more," she replied. "We've got to do some talking first."

"What is this talking?" he said in a louder voice. He pulled out a roll of bills. The smile faded and his eyes bulged. "I want boobies. I want the grind-a-grind." The teenage innocence disappeared, and the self-absorbed arrogance of the immature adult surfaced. He started to push her off his lap. Sensing she was losing her opportunity, she grabbed his head and shoved his face back into her breasts.

"Better?" She pulled his face from her bosom, and the smile had returned.

"Yes please."

"Now, before I give you the grind-a-grind, we've got to get to know each other. What's your name?"

"Ahm—" He paused. "Keevin. My name is Keevin."

"Kevin? Okay, Kevin will work for now. My name is Bambi. What do you do, Kevin?"

"I do fine. Thank you, Bom-bi."

Sherri cringed. This was painful. "What's your job?"

"Oh, I train to be pilot."

Interesting. She shifted herself on his lap and ran the fingers of her left hand along the buttons of his shirt. "Are you out at the Navy base?"

He said nothing and his eyes remained focused on her breasts.

"How long are you in town?"

“Two more weeks.”

Sherri thought for a moment. The two Saudis had already been in Pensacola for two weeks. Obviously, they weren’t students, and they weren’t flying with the Navy, but they were there to fly something.

“You must be really smart,” she said. “Not everybody gets to fly airplanes.”

“I am one of Allah’s warriors,” Alnami said, his voice rising. “Allahu Akbar.”

Sherri studied Alnami. “What is Allah having you do?” She bit her lower lip, realizing she might have pushed the conversation too far, too fast.

His eyes moved from her breasts back to her eyes. His nostrils flared as he bared his yellowing teeth. “No more talk of this,” Alnami shouted. “I want grind-a-grind from you.” He pulled a fifty out of his pocket and waved it at her. Sherri sighed, realizing she would not get any more information unless she took it to the next level. That was not going to happen. She took the bill and stuck it in her bra.

She rose from his lap and posed in front of him, hands on her hips. He’s done talking. It’s time to get out of here. She slowly swayed back and forth, running her hands along the sides of her hips up to her breasts. The dancing must have been good, because she noticed his partner staring at her while still getting his lap dance.

Sherri leaned forward, nearly rubbing her breasts from his knees to his head, her body barely missing contact with his. She said in his ear, “How about you and me leave this place?”

Alnami’s smile grew bigger. “Yes, please.”

Pushing herself away from him, she moved behind his chair and ran hands down the front of his chest. “Okay, I’ve got to go clock out and change clothes. I’ll be back here in fifteen minutes. Don’t move.”

“I not move. Don’t change your clothes. You sexy momma.”

Sherri forced a weak smile. “Okay, baby. Whatever you want.”

She left the table and headed to the dressing room. Closing the door behind her, she shielded her eyes from the steady light. As her eyes adjusted, she went to her locker and gathered her things. Standing in front of the mirror, she pulled off the blond wig, and her deep red hair fell to her shoulders. Pulling out a brush, she touched it up from where the wig had pressed it down or tangled it. She slipped her tan overcoat over her shoulders and retrieved her clothes from her locker. A few of the other girls watched her.

"Sorry, ladies, I'm not cut out for this," she said. She turned and walked out the back door of the strip club.

The light by the back door was burned out. She clutched her purse tightly and gripped the can of mace in her coat pocket as she approached her rental car, a shiny new red Toyota Celica. She grabbed her keys and cell phone from her purse and climbed in. Kicking off the stiletto heels, she cranked the engine and pulled on to Highway 98, dialing on her cell phone as she drove.

The phone answered on the first ring. "Did you get it?"

"No, I didn't get that far. Alnami was getting a little too friendly."

"I told you this might happen. Did you find out anything?"

"They're here two more weeks, and they'll be flying next week, but I don't know what and I don't know why. Sorry, it's the best I was willing to do under the circumstances."

"Okay," the voice replied. "Get back here tomorrow. I've got something else for you."

"Like what?"

"Our informant in New York wants to meet with you ASAP."

"All right," Sherri said begrudgingly. "I'll see you tomorrow." As she hung up the phone, the car lurched forward. The phone slipped from her fingers, falling to the floorboard as her body slammed into her seat belt. She glanced in the rearview mirror as a car slid back and accelerated toward her again.

"What the hell?"

She put both hands on the wheel and her foot pressed the accelerator as the car made contact with the red Celica a second time. As she reached the Pensacola Bay Bridge, the vehicle tried to spin her car by striking the left rear fender. She accelerated again, making the assailant miss his mark.

The mystery car pulled behind her, two car lengths back. Every time she passed a vehicle, the car followed her.

Who the hell was attacking her? Could it be Alnami? No, she hadn't been gone long enough. He would still be waiting for her inside the strip club, probably constructing ridiculous fantasies in his head.

It was a dark, starless night, and the rise in the bridge was a half mile away. This hump in the bridge allowed larger boats to enter and exit Pensacola Bay from the Gulf. Once on the other side, she would be in civilization again.

Vinyl and glass shards flew everywhere inside the vehicle as bullets

pierced the back window of her car and hit the passenger side of the dashboard. She screamed and let go of the steering wheel, her foot coming off the gas for an instant.

Her eyes darted back and forth as her car veered toward the rail to her right. Grabbing the steering wheel, she pressed the accelerator once again as she jerked her car away from the side rail.

“Oh, God,” she said, “why the hell are they shooting at me?”

She swerved to put another car between them, then pushed the accelerator to the floor. The innocent car she just passed bumped into the guardrail, sending sparks flying. It spun around as the assailant hit the car from the rear, then continued on. The dark sedan accelerated and closed the distance between them.

Another burst of machine-gun fire. Sherri screamed as the bullets struck the rear of her vehicle. At the bottom of the hump, she checked her rearview mirror. Shattered glass and bullet holes in the rear window were all she could see. Based on the lights in the distance, she estimated she’d reach the end of the bridge in less than a minute.

With a quarter mile until the end of the bridge, the car shuddered. Sherri’s gaze shifted to the front of her car, and her shoulders slumped. She beat her fist against the steering wheel as smoke rose from under the hood and the car started decelerating.

The speedometer read 80 mph at this point, but the car no longer responded to her foot pressing the accelerator. She pushed it all the way to the floor, but nothing. In her side mirror, she noticed the assailant closing in behind her. The car had closed within three car lengths when another round of bullets hit her vehicle.

Her heart pounded as she reached the end of the bridge and the Celica slowed through 55 mph.

“Shit . . . If I break down on this bridge, I’m done,” she said as she pumped the accelerator. “Who the hell are these guys?”

The Celica slowed to 25 mph now, and other cars quickly caught and passed her.

Glancing in the mirror, she saw the dark-colored sedan make a U-turn at the end of the bridge and head toward Pensacola.

In front of her, red-and-blue lights danced on top of a parked car. Sherri had driven into a speed trap. Her assailants turned and ran.

“Yeah,” she said. “Take that, asshole. You’d better run.”

A faint nervous smile eased across her face as she glided the unpowered vehicle into the right lane and onto the side of the road.

The car came to a stop, and as soon as she put it in park, her body began to shake as the adrenaline faded. Leaning forward on the steering wheel, she began to sob. She had almost been killed. A myriad of thoughts raced through her head as the police car pulled in behind her. The officer tapped on the window with his flashlight. She lowered the window and covered her eyes as he pointed the light in her face.

“Driver’s license and registration,” he said.

“No problem.” She dug in her purse for her driver’s license. When she reached into the glove box for the rental agreement, she glanced in the passenger’s side mirror and saw the dark outline of the officer’s partner approaching the other side of her vehicle. Why didn’t he say something about the smoke coming from under the hood? Or the blown-out back window?

She stopped digging and glanced back at the officer who spoke to her. Is he wearing jeans? With a quick glance back to the passenger-side mirror, she saw his partner approaching the vehicle was wearing—shorts? Wait, how could this guy not have noticed the bullet holes?

“Hey, what agency are you guys with?” she said as she turned back to the cop. Before she could react, he jammed a long stick through the window and pressed it into her neck. The electric shock was fast and intense, then—blackness.

2

April 15, 2001

A SMALL SLIVER of glistening sunlight cut through the dark hotel room, illuminating its small interior. Dust particles danced through the piercing beam like fireflies on a clear summer night. The light pried into his consciousness while the grinding gears of a construction vehicle outside ripped it open.

Jason Conrad buried his face in a pillow and moaned as his head felt ready to explode. He recognized this place, barely. The hangover reminded him that his recent lifestyle choices had their consequences.

It didn't take long for his body to tell him he needed to relieve himself. He swung his feet off the bed and glanced next to him, rubbing the sides of his throbbing temples with his fingertips. The blonde lay nude on top of the sheets. She had every appearance of being attractive from here. He struggled to remember her face. He definitely could not remember her name.

Jason tiptoed to the bathroom, as much to protect his pounding head as not to wake the blonde. After relieving himself, he washed his hands and face and brushed his teeth. When he left the bathroom, she was sitting up in the bed, watching him. She is pretty. Now, what is her name again?

"Good morning, sexy," she said. She sounded much more awake than he did.

"Hi," Jason said. She was too bubbly for early morning.

"I can't believe you're up," she said in a strong Texas drawl.

"Yeah."

"Am I still beautiful?"

Jason grinned. "Absolutely."

“You’re quiet this morning. You wouldn’t stop talking last night.”

Vague memories of the night before pushed themselves into his consciousness. He crawled back into the bed, and she leaned over and kissed him.

“Oh, you brushed your teeth. I’ll be right back,” she said, climbing out of bed.

Jason studied her figure. She had all the right equipment. He could see why he would have been talkative. Now he wished he didn’t drink as much. This was a night he would have liked to remember.

Yesterday started off well. As flight lead of a four-ship of T-38s, they’d done a flyover for a Texas Rangers game. It was a great TDY, or temporary duty, to Dallas, with per diem. The flyover during the national anthem at the Ballpark in Arlington was uneventful, and they landed at Naval Air Station Fort Worth, formerly known Carswell Air Force Base, right afterward.

A limousine provided by one of the Rangers’ owners, picked them up outside Base Operations. It contained a cooler full of beer and a tray of cheese and crackers to tide them over until they arrived at the stadium in Arlington.

It was a tight fit with eight sweaty, cocky T-38 instructors, but they didn’t care. They were amazed at the red carpet treatment and relished every minute of it. The pilots were treated like rock stars in the owners’ VIP suite, with all the food and alcohol they wanted. After the game, the limo drove them to the West End in Dallas. Jason and his buddies found themselves in Gators, a piano bar/restaurant with dueling white grand pianos and a rowdy crowd. He remembered meeting her at Gators. *What is her name?*

Jason rolled over on his back and stared at the ceiling. The nameless faces of his women over the years skipped through his thoughts. He felt empty. Like every other one-night stand, *she* crept back into his head. What happened to the one who’d slipped away six years ago?

Whatever happened to Kathy Delgato?

The door to the bathroom opened, and the blonde traipsed back into the room. She took the time to brush her hair and put on lipstick. Posing at the end of the bed, she riveted her eyes at him wantonly.

“Oh, good, you’re still awake.” She traipsed around the bed to the window and opened the curtain, standing nude in front of the window.

“I can’t help it,” she said with a wry smile. “I’m an exhibitionist.”

“Clearly.”

“What time do you fly back?” She posed seductively in front of the window.

Jason glanced at the clock. Red digital numbers displayed eight thirty-three. The pilots planned to leave the hotel at noon. “I need to be at the base at eleven,” he lied.

“Oh,” she said, sauntering toward him.

“Do I...” He paused. “Do I need to get you a ride home?” He couldn’t remember how they made it back to the hotel.

“No silly. I drove us, remember?”

No, and I can’t remember your name either, so please don’t ask.

“Well,” he said, glancing at the clock, “we have some time.”

The blonde smiled and crawled back onto the bed. He stopped hating himself as she wrapped her arms around him. Even drunk, he had done very well.

SHERRI SHIVERED from the cool breeze as she lay on her back. Fading in and out of consciousness, she tossed her head from side to side. Various colors edged their way into her brain. She writhed in place, and the ground shifted slightly. Her muscles ached, but the sun on her face was irritating. When she tried to open her eyes, her hand shielded them from the brightness. The smell of saltwater filled her nostrils as waves crashed onto the shore.

She was at the beach.

The sun glared as she struggled again to open her eyes. The sky was a bright blue, and seagulls called out to her as they bobbed and weaved ten feet overhead, floating rather than flying.

Her body ached. Rolling her head to the right, she saw nothing but white sand and sea oats. To the left was more of the same, but with a stinging sensation as she turned her head. Sherri managed to roll to her left side and prop herself up on her elbow. Her joints were stiff and her skin covered with goose bumps. Her head hurt as she tried to figure out how she ended up here, wherever here turned out to be.

Shifting her weight, she managed to sit up on her knees and check herself out. Nothing was broken, and she didn’t notice any injuries other than the neck pain, stiff joints, and sore muscles. She still wore the schoolgirl outfit from the night before. Checking her bra and panties, she found everything in place and Alnami’s fifty-dollar bill still tucked in her bra.

What the hell happened? Someone chased her on the bridge and

shot up her car, but she managed to escape. The cop. He did something to her. When she touched the left side of her neck, the pain shot through her body again. The cop shocked her with something. Only he wasn't a cop.

They had to be working together. She was an easy target and nobody is that bad of a shot to miss her for that long. Whoever it was, they were sending a message. The thoughts hurt her head as she shielded her eyes from the sun, which was inching its way above the horizon.

Sherri rose to her feet. She had no shoes. Rolling off the white stockings, she tossed them in the sand and untied her white shirt to cover her belly. She buttoned her shirt and felt a little more comfortable. She slowly brushed the sand off her thighs, waist, and arms. Placing her hands in her deep red hair, she desperately tried to shake out the sand. It would take days, she determined, if not weeks, to get all of the sand out. She searched her immediate area: no purse, no phone, and no car keys.

When she started on this story, Sherri never thought she would experience something like this. She always enjoyed the sense of accomplishment from hard work. As an investigative reporter, she put herself in many compromising situations, but this had been the worst. Being shot at wasn't something new, but being shot at with automatic weapons was a twist. Even in Sarajevo, she hadn't faced such firepower. There she'd been dodging sniper fire.

Sherri's head ached; she was dehydrated. She scanned the beach. The closest people were an elderly couple using metal detectors a hundred yards to the east. To the west, more people in the distance, the silhouettes of condos and hotels, and the familiar water tower of Pensacola Beach. It was about three miles away. Leaving the solitude of the sea oats and sand dunes of this isolated portion of the beach, she trudged toward the water, then west, toward civilization.

3

April 15, 2001

JASON DRESSED IN JEANS and a T-shirt, then slid on his flight boots. Stirring a cup of coffee, he sat in the recliner, smiling, watching the striking blonde get dressed. It didn't take her long. She wore a blue jean miniskirt and a white lace bra. When she saw him examining her, she smiled. He could not, for the life of him, remember her name.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she said, brushing her hair.

"How old are you?"

"You're not supposed to ask a girl that question."

"Oh, no, don't get me wrong. You don't look old. I just want to make sure I didn't spend the night with a teenager," Jason said. "Let me see your driver's license." It was a tactic he'd used before, a quick way to find out a name.

"I left it in my car. I didn't want you to rob me when I finished having my way with you," she said, putting the brush back in her purse.

"Oh," was all Jason could say.

She stopped in the bathroom doorway, half-dressed, frowning at him. Her head tilted to the side. Jason knew he was in trouble.

"What's my name?"

Damn.

Jason squinted at her inquisitively. It was the best he could do in his present physical condition.

"What kind of question is that?" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"A legitimate one. What's my name?" Her Texas accent was more prominent now. She said she was born and raised in Garland. That one detail didn't bring back her name.

"What do you mean, what's your name? Of course I remember your name. I can't believe you'd ask me that question."

“Okay, then, what is it?”

“Well, what’s my name?” Deflecting was the only strategy he could come up with at the moment.

“Oliver.”

Jason grinned. “Oliver what?”

“Klosi—something. Hell, I don’t know,” she said, her voice getting louder. “I couldn’t pronounce it. You said last night it was Russian.”

Jason chuckled. He’d forgotten they were wearing their “Friday morale” nametags. His bore the name “Oliver Klosov” which, after a few beers, translated to “All of her clothes off.” He was pleased he’d managed to stick with his story while drinking so much.

“Well, see, you don’t remember my name,” Jason said.

“Bullshit. Oliver, what’s my name?”

He could see her body tense. Jason had every intention of being apologetic. There was no way out of this one.

“I’m sorry. Candy?”

“Candy?”

“Cindy?”

“Are you kidding me?” she screamed. “You son of a bitch. You had sex with me all last night *and* this morning, and you don’t know my name?” She grabbed his shave kit from the bathroom and threw it at him. He caught the bag, but the contents fell on the floor. She started throwing everything she could at him. He was able to dodge it all, or deflect it.

“Look, I’m sorry. I had a lot to drink. You *know* that. You brought me home.”

She started crying as she buttoned her shirt. “Why do I always find the assholes? I thought you were nice. You talked to me nice, you treated me nice. You said I was beautiful—”

“You *are* beautiful. And I’m nice. I’m sorry—”

“You’re not nice or sorry—you’re an asshole.”

“I’m not an asshole,” he said. “I’m a jet pilot.” It was a stupid one-liner from an old joke, but hey, he was hung over.

She grabbed her sandals and headed for the door.

Jason jumped up to follow her. He hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings, but it was a little too late.

She marched to the elevator, rode down to the lobby, and headed out the front door. Jason followed her all the way, trying to apologize, but she ignored him. When they reached the parking lot, she stopped. Two guys were leaning on her BMW.

“Carly, what the hell are you doing at this hotel?” the shorter one

said, stepping away from her car. "And who's this asshole?"

Carly, that's it. He chose to disregard the asshole comment under the circumstances.

"Why the hell are you followin' me, Billy Ray?" she yelled. Jason watched her disposition change once again as the crying stopped immediately. Jason had pissed her off, but this guy? He lit her fuse.

"You're my girl, Carly," Billy Ray said, as he started to bow up to Jason. He was shorter, but stockier. Not muscular, but a lot of attitude. The sidekick, however, might be someone to worry about. He stood a rather wiry six-four.

"Billy Ray," she said, "we broke up three weeks ago. You've got to quit followin' me." Jason noticed her accent came out naturally when she fought with this Billy Ray.

"But Carly, you're my girl."

"I ain't your girl, Billy Ray. You can't tell me who I can have sex with and who I can't."

Oh shit, here we go.

Billy Ray's eyes grew wide, and his nostrils flared like a bull in the ring. Jason turned to leave. He knew where this was going, and the outcome wouldn't be good.

"Where're you going, asshole? I ain't through with you yet," Billy Ray said. The tall guy moved around in front of him, blocking his path. Jason turned ninety degrees to the right and backed up two steps, positioning the two in front of him.

"Look, fellas, I don't want any trouble. I was just walking Carly to her car," he said, glancing at Carly.

"Oh, great," she yelled. "*Now* you wanna act like you remember my name."

Damn.

Billy Ray glared at her before slowly turning his head back to Jason, his eyes wild and his face contorted. "You screwed my girl, and you didn't even know her name?"

"Look, fellas—"

"And he's a helluva better lay than you, Billy Ray," she yelled. Jason knew she was trying to piss off her ex-boyfriend to get him to start a fight.

It worked.

Billy Ray lunged at Jason and threw a wide roundhouse at his head. Jason deflected it, using Billy Ray's momentum to push him against the car next to him. He immediately turned to focus on the tall guy.

The giant was slow and tried to grab Jason in a bear hug from the

front. Mistake. Jason hit him with the heel of his flat palm just below the sternum, and he stumbled backward. Billy Ray turned and charged again. Jason grabbed his wrist and pushed it toward his forearm, and Billy Ray yelped with pain. Jason pushed him on the ground, but now the tall guy grabbed him from behind, lifting him off the ground. His arms were pinned against his body. Billy Ray leaped from the ground and swung wildly to punch him in the stomach. It was a sloppy punch, but he was a captive target. The tall guy grew tired of holding him up and lowered him to the ground.

As Jason's feet touched, Billy Ray moved in closer. Jason lifted his feet off the ground and started to slide out of the tall guy's grasp until he squeezed him again. It was enough, though. Jason kicked his left leg out, slamming his foot into the inside of Billy Ray's right knee. Billy Ray screamed in pain and fell to the ground. The tall guy squeezed him harder and Jason brought both feet underneath him.

Lifting his right leg, he scraped the side of his boot against the tall guy's right shin and slammed his heel into the top of the tall guy's foot. The tall guy yelped and released him. Jason spun around and delivered several quick blows to the tall guy's stomach and a quick right cross to his chin, and the tall guy fell to the ground.

He turned to deliver a quick blow to Billy Ray's left eye as he tried to stand. Billy Ray went back to the asphalt, unconscious.

Jason gasped for breath. Sweat dripped from his forehead, and his heart pounded against his chest. He felt like he was going to vomit. Instinctively, he scanned the area for other threats. Seeing none, he glanced back at the cowboys lying on the asphalt and bent over at the waist, his hands on his knees.

"Oliver," he heard Carly say.

Dammit. He needed to stop pursuing women easily impressed by a flight suit. He glanced at Carly for the first time since the altercation began. She gazed at him like a high-school crush as she stepped over and placed a piece of paper in his T-shirt pocket.

"Call me," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Jason stared at her and grimaced. He knew it was time to get out of there. Cursing himself, he marched back into the hotel.

4

April 18, 2001

THE T-38 BARRELED THROUGH THE SKY, five hundred feet off the ground at three hundred knots, the morning sun glistening off its canopy. Daylight had pushed its way above the horizon well over two hours ago, making the sky over western Oklahoma clear for miles, though the temperatures still reflected the cold front that had pushed through the Midwest. The jet experienced occasional light turbulence as the morning sun heated the ground, and the two occupants bounced in their seats.

Jason sat in the back seat of the Northrop T-38 Talon. The T-38 had been designed as a trainer for the 1960s Century Series fighters. The T-38 was such a successful design that it had remained the US Air Force's advanced supersonic jet trainer ever since.

The tandem-seat aircraft was sexy. It had the appearance and flight characteristics of a fighter jet, and while the T-38 was a great jet, it had its flaws. The biggest challenge students faced was landing the jet. The small wings required a faster takeoff and landing speed, and that detail often undid many students. They simply could not adapt to the speed needed to think and work in the T-38.

Jason had been an instructor pilot in the aircraft for the last four years. He was what the Air Force called a FAIP (fape), a first assignment instructor pilot. After graduating from pilot training, he went directly to instructor school to return to Vance AFB as an IP.

Teaching someone to fly a supersonic jet was the best way to make a living, period. It was a job he relished, but being required to do it in Enid, Oklahoma, as a bachelor, was a difficult task. He spent as much time out of town as he could, flying student or instructor cross-country

sorties. Unfortunately, these trips sometimes ended up like his Dallas trip a few days ago—one-night stands he couldn't undo.

His mind wandered as he considered what his commander asked him over a month ago. "You'll be up for an assignment soon. What do you want to do with your career?" Jason was aware the Air Force was ready for him to move. He needed direction in his life. He'd shown up as a student with no desire to meet a woman, and then *she* stumbled into his life. As quickly as she fell into his life, she fell out of it. Jason had kept Kathy out of his thoughts for most of his time at Vance. But today, for some reason, the vision of her pushed in like a fullback on the one-yard line. Perhaps it was the incident with Carly. Perhaps it was loneliness creeping up on him.

"Okay, sir. I'm coming up on the next turn point in thirty seconds, according to my timing. Fuel checks, altitude, and time are good. Next heading is three-two-zero for three minutes and fifteen seconds. Sir, working big to small, I see the two rivers I want to turn between. Now I'm looking for a farmhouse to the south and the grain silo about a mile north. There's the silo. Confirm?"

"Check, that's the silo," Jason responded to his student in the front seat, snapping out of his daydream. Jason did not need to reference his chart for the turn points. He'd flown this route a hundred times over the years. He'd memorized all the turn points, which was good since it gave him the opportunity to keep his eyes outside the aircraft. Jason cross-checked the stopwatch strapped to his knee board to the time calculated on the chart and nodded silently in the back. His student's times were good.

"There's the farmhouse. Turn point is in twenty seconds. The cows are starting to run away from us."

"Check, Stanley, but those aren't cows, they're horses. The cows don't move—they're used to us. The horses don't like the noise or the speed." Jason glanced at his instrument panel to cross-check his fuel and the Heading Situation Indicator (HSI). Stanley wasn't actually the student's name. It was a generic name all instructors used to identify students: Stanley Student. Jason wasn't sure how it evolved, but it was time-tested and applied to all students, including females.

"Stand by turn," the student said. "Turning in three, two, one, turn now . . . new heading is three-two-zero for three minutes and fifteen seconds." The student rolled the sleek jet into a sixty-degree bank turn and pulled the aircraft to three-and-a-half G's. Their g-suits quickly

inflated with air, putting immediate pressure on their legs and abdomens, preventing blood from pooling in their lower extremities. The jet started to lose altitude as the nose tracked below the horizon.

“Climb,” Jason said. The command coincided with the student reaching the required heading, rolling out, and raising the nose of the jet. The student rolled the T-38 wings level, and the g-suits deflated. “Remember, just like in the traffic pattern, when you bank this aircraft, you’ve got to move more than the ailerons. You’ve got to add a little power and change the pitch.”

“Roger,” the student replied.

They continued on course for several minutes. Jason kept his own cross-check going, clock to map to ground, bringing his instruments into cross-check periodically. They bounced around more violently as the turbulence increased. He could tell the student had not strapped in well by the way his helmet bounced around.

“Stanley, do you remember in the brief when we talked about low-level turbulence?”

“Uh . . . yeah. Would you mind taking the jet for a moment?”

“I have the aircraft,” Jason said, taking control of the jet.

“Roger, you have the aircraft.”

Three seconds later the student chimed in, “Okay, sir, I’m back. I have the aircraft,” the student said, shaking the stick.

“Roger, you have the aircraft.”

“Ten seconds to the next turn point, but I’m not sure where it’s at.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Uh, it’s supposed to be a windmill.”

“Do you see it? It’s one of the old western-style ones like you see in the movies—not like those wind-power windmills.” Jason cross-checked his timing with his chart. His eyes darted from his chart to his instruments, particularly his altimeter, and back to his chart.

“Uhm . . . which one?”

He glimpsed over the shoulder of the student. Five windmills on the right and two on the left. “Huh, that’s different,” he said. “I guess they put those up recently. There was only one here the last time I flew this route. Turn on time. Turn now.”

The student banked the T-38 in a nice, level turn and rolled out on his heading. The jet leveled off, and the student went back to work with his timing and navigation. The two flew in silence for the next four minutes, enjoying the ride. Jason wanted to see how the student

would fly with no instruction, and the kid was doing well.

"Fifteen seconds to the next turn point," the student said. "I'm looking for the T-intersection going from north to south. No visual yet, so we'll be turning on timing."

"Checks."

"Three, two, one, turning. Heading one-one-five. There's the turn point to the east. We're a quarter mile off course, sir."

The turn was thirty degrees to the left. Jason cleared in front of the jet for the turn, as he knew from experience that most students glued their head inside the aircraft to the Attitude Direction Indicator (ADI) and the altimeter. Quickly, Jason checked where the student was looking, and his suspicion was correct. Jason was about to speak up when he noticed a black flash in front of the jet.

Uh-oh. Birds. Jason felt the impacts on the side of the jet. He didn't wait for the student in the front seat to react. "I HAVE THE AIRCRAFT!" He grabbed the stick and rolled the aircraft's wings level. He immediately raised the nose of the jet to climb away from the ground. "You okay up there?"

"Yeah, that spooked me," the student said.

"Attention all aircraft, Colt Seven-Two is departing IR-145 at turn point three. Passing through three thousand three hundred," Jason broadcast on the common radio frequency for the low-level route. They were too low and too far away from Vance AFB's approach control to make radio contact with them.

The aircraft shuddered as both J-85 axial flow engines flamed out. Cross-checking his engine instruments, the tachometers, EGTs, and fuel flow indicators were all rolling back, confirming his dual engine failure. The Master Caution light came on immediately. Glancing at the Caution Light panel, he saw the left Fuel Pressure light illuminate instantly, followed by the right Fuel Pressure light. He cross-checked his airspeed, now decreasing through 250 knots indicated airspeed (KIAS). He raised the nose twenty degrees while simultaneously moving both throttles over the hump.

The "Boldface" emergency action procedure for emergency air start is THROTTLE/THROTTLES - MAX. Both throttles slammed into the afterburner range—nothing. He moved the throttles back and over the hump once again.

Still no ignition.

The Left and Right Generator lights illuminated on the Caution

Light panel, followed by the Utility and Flight Hydraulics.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday . . . Colt Seven-Two on IR-145. Dual engine failure at turn point three." The jet passed through 6,000 feet at one hundred eighty knots. "Okay, Stanley, I'll try to start these one more time, otherwise we'll have to take the silk elevator to the ground." There was no response from the student. "You still with me up there?"

"Yes, sir. Please start it."

Jason moved the throttles into the afterburner range for the third time with the same result.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday . . . Colt Seven-Two, T-38, two souls on board, seventy miles southwest of Vance. Engine failure times two. Crew is ejecting at 7,000 feet."

Jason checked his airspeed indicator one last time. "Okay, Stanley, airspeed's passing through one hundred twenty knots. BAILOUT, BAILOUT, BAILOUT!"

The student left the jet after the first command to leave the aircraft. The eerie silence shattered by the deafening wind blast as the front canopy left the jet. Jason reached for his handgrips and braced his body for the ejection. Placing his knees together, he pulled his feet back, pushed his back straight against his seat, pulled his elbows in, and held his chin down toward his chest. When he pulled the handgrips up, the aft canopy blew off the top of the jet. Everything not welded to the jet left the interior space of the cockpit: checklists, charts, and knee boards all sucked out by the wind.

Less than a second after the canopy left the aircraft, the rocket in his seat exploded and he felt a slight pinch in his neck. The wind blast ripped at his head and body as his seat shot up the rails and pushed him out into the cold blue sky.