

## “Into The Black” Exerpt

–One–

### The Deceased

Dan Harcotte jolted awake when the cold water hit his head and engulfed his body. He had no idea how long he'd slept. It was so dark he could barely see. The harbor lights twinkled through the waves beyond his feet and this confused him. He didn't dare breathe. He struggled to right himself but nausea overtook him and he belched a stream of vomit into the pressing ocean. Gasping for air, he sucked bitter salt water into his lungs and vomited again. His heart pounded so fast it hurt.

Death hovered about him like a sick joke. He shuddered, wracked with panic and regret. *How could it be over so soon?* He clawed at the water violently shaking his head like a terrified infant. The suffocating horror went on and on.

After convulsing for what seemed an eternity, he relaxed to the liberating sensation of his hair waving in the ocean current. A sense of peace washed over him. The worst was over.

A muffled crash followed by a gentle wave of pressure signaled a disturbance in the water. He turned his head. A dark figure with a bright light above a scuba mask glided toward him through jade green waters. *Coast Guard? Good Samaritan?*

The light from his savior's forehead blinded him. He felt sleepy. The scuba diver gripped him by the necktie and tugged. Dan assumed he would be pulled to the catwalk along the slip. He hung helpless in dull surprise as he was pulled instead toward the back of the yacht.

Mossy algae waved atop the propeller blades, each the size of a serving platter. He stared into the murky scuba mask searching for his savior's eyes and saw nothing beyond the bright glare. The diver wrapped his necktie around the base of the propeller.

It made no sense, but Dan didn't care. Darkness closed in. Nothing mattered anymore.

## The Detective

A row of dim lights extending into the ocean caught Lieutenant Nance Spinosa's attention. She tapped the brakes. It was hard to see much detail in the dark, but she had a feeling it was the marina. Up ahead was a sign for Linden Street, the one Officer Carter had mentioned.

She turned into an avenue of palm trees, glancing at her phone. It indicated Carter was to the southwest. The road went in a different direction so she pulled onto the lawn, reminding herself she was a homicide detective for the Long Beach Police Department and would not get a ticket for driving on the grass. Shrubs leapt into her headlight beams. She swerved her car around the bushes until she reached smooth asphalt, then drove to the far side of the parking lot, next to the marina's entry.

She opened the door of the black Ford Crown Victoria and stepped into the cool ocean mist. A fine rain blew sideways through the orange glow of the street lamps. The tiny drops pelted her face like a barrage of icy pinpricks.

The dock up ahead rattled with the sound of feet pounding wooden planks. A silhouette with a policeman's cap ran toward her.

"Over here!" he hollered.

Nance recognized Officer Michael Carter's voice. She touched the black curls swirled into a bun at the back of her head, knowing even stray hairs could detract from her authority. She disregarded his twenty-something good looks as she did all the young officers on her team, though Carter's looks were a bit harder to ignore.

"Did you bring the tranquilizer gun?" he asked in a breathy holler as he ran toward her.

"I've got it right here," she said, pulling it out of the front passenger seat and holding it up high. Officer Carter snatched the rifle from her grip, mistaking her move as a hand-off. He ran toward the gate.

Nance huffed. According to protocol, she should control the weapon, but he was already well on his way to the scene, so no point arguing the matter.

She chased Carter over a short stretch of grass and down the dock, their feet thundering on the wooden planks. He cut right and barreled down a side dock that ran alongside the yacht. Nance was breathing hard when she heard it. The violent thrashing grew louder as they neared.

*“Hey! You’ve got the tranq gun?”* the cop at the scene called out. It was Jerry Wittacre—fifty-something and beset by an expanding belly. Nance was surprised to see him, but far more riveted by the violence tearing up the water.

She followed Carter as he raced around the prow and down the floating strip that led to the back of the yacht. He put the butt of the rifle to his shoulder, stood stock still to aim, took the first shot and missed.

The beam from Wittacre’s flashlight pierced the waves and the horror continued—a nightmarish strobe of flat black eyes, arched rows of saw teeth, and a mangled human torso spilling red blood into green waters.

It was a great white all right. The only ones Nance had seen were in photos. Now she was practically on top of one, getting drenched from its violent thrashing. She stood fast, her fear of losing the respect of her subordinates conquering her fear of the man-eating monster.

The human remains bounced about in the waves trailing a long stretch of intestine. One arm dangled from the right shoulder, the other was gone. The victim appeared attached to the propeller by his necktie, but his face was a wreck of blood and shredded skin.

“Christ!” Wittacre hollered, still panting. “He came back around while you were gone. I guess you were right, those four shots didn’t do shit!”

Carter took a second shot, this one hit home. The shark jerked back then dove toward the mangled torso. The thrashing began anew. Carter shot him again, then a fourth time. The submarine-sized shark hung limp in the water and floated back a bit, out.

“Was that enough to kill it?” Nance asked, panting.

Carter’s face glistened from exertion. “Kill it? We can’t kill a great white, they’re an endangered species!”

Nance was stunned. Was this some weird California joke? “Of course you have to kill it,” she said, “we need to retrieve the body parts in its stomach.”

“Why? So his wife can put more hamburger in a casket? His head and upper torso are intact and he’s still got his right hand. We’ve got his dental work, his DNA, and his fingerprints.”

“What about his stomach contents?”

“His stomach is right there, it’s that yellow thing bobbing out of the bottom of what’s left of him. Jesus God! Why are we even talking about this? I need some coffee.” He turned to walk back the way he came.

“Excuse me, Carter, the tranquilizer gun,” Nance said in her most authoritative tone.

He spun around and plopped the rifle in her upturned palms. She felt like a fool the instant her hands dipped from its weight. The ammo spent, it was nothing but baggage now.

Wittacre snickered as Carter spun back around and walked away. Nance looked past Wittacre. Waking up from its daze, the shark curved into a broad U-turn and headed back out to sea.

“I’m going onboard to secure the scene,” she said. “I’d like you to stand guard and make sure no one comes near the yacht unless I clear them. When Carter gets back, tell him to come below deck. I want him to start dusting for fingerprints. If he needs a camera, I’ve got one.”

She climbed the ladder to the upper deck of the yacht, walked to the companionway and descended the carpeted stairwell to the deck below.

Her cheeks burned from the verbal encounter. Once again, she looked like a dunce in front of her subordinates. Two months into her job as head of Long Beach PD’s homicide division and not one case closed. She had to start solving murders, fast.

She entered the yacht’s lower deck, adjusting her balance to the gentle rocking. A panel of small screens and tiny blinking lights brightened the gloom. She scanned the yacht’s interior, looking for evidence. The white leather sofas, chrome fixtures, and marine-blue carpet indicated a man with expensive tastes who liked to flash his wealth. The man dangling from the propeller by the neck-tie? Nance allowed her intuitive side to emerge, the side detectives rarely referred to beyond so-called ‘hunches.’

According to the still small voice within, the man sought status with the glitterati of his profession, using his yacht as a lure. He invited his clients and business partners aboard for catered dinners and cocktails, because an ambitious man building his wealth would regard an expensive possession such as a yacht an investment rather than a luxury.

If his client was a lucrative target, would he play the old boys’ game and hire prostitutes, pass them off as friends who liked to party? And once said clients were drunk and satisfied, would they be more willing to sign a contract they had failed to scrutinize? And how did these clients feel about their host once the love cruise was over?

Nance kept her hunches separate from gathered evidence in the file system of her mind, but such right-brain musings often made a good starting point for an investigation.

The clouds beyond the yacht’s cramped windows gradually brightened to magenta. The white sofas turned pink in the twilight. From outside, she heard Officer Carter hail Wittacre, who passed on her instructions, delivering them in a—*can you believe her*—tone of voice, but at least he followed her orders.

She stood, pulled her camera from her jacket pocket, and looked around. Officer Carter came down the carpeted steps lugging a silver case over his shoulder. Nance stared up at him, ready for a challenge.

“Hey,” he said. Nance couldn’t tell if he was hanging his head or if he had to tilt it to keep from bumping his skull on the low ceiling of the stairwell.

It was hard to stay annoyed at him.

“Sorry about the way I acted,” Carter mumbled as he came off the last step. “Shooting sharks can be nerve wracking. I brought my fingerprint kit so I can get started down here, if you like.”

Respect, at last. It was a start.

“Thanks,” she said. He smiled. She ignored his chocolate-brown hair and deep-blue eyes, a rare combination that never failed to fascinate her. But he was a subordinate, getting involved was out of the question.

He placed the case on the sofa and lifted the lid to reveal plastic canisters, feather-light dusting brushes, and rolls of forensic tape, all resting on eggcrate foam. He had expressed an interest in being trained as a detective the first day they met. Nance wanted to let him take over, but needed to observe him.

“I’d like to share some evidence gathering tips I’ve picked up along the way,” she said, feeling her way through the fog of her promotion. “And I wouldn’t mind knowing any tips you have to pass along.”

He nodded.

“The first thing I like to do before taking fingerprints,” Nance continued, “is document every inch of the crime scene with high resolution photographs. This little guy is 150 megapixels.” She lifted her silver camera. “That’s about as high rez as it gets, unless you work for NASA. I also bring a high-lumen flashlight.” She handed it over to him. “I’ll show you how to angle the light. When were done with the first section, we’ll switch and you can take the camera.”

Once they had finished the photo record, Nance noticed the cold saltwater had sunk through her gabardine pants and shapewear. If she didn’t change soon, she’d get a horrid rash.

“I need to go. Would you like me to call in the CSI team to take over?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he said, “I keep an extra uniform in my patrol car, so I’ve already changed.”

“Well, I’m afraid I came unprepared, so I’m heading back,” Nance said. “When you’re done here, you can take the rest of the day off, unless you want the overtime.”

He didn’t look up. “Overtime.”

