

Chapter 1

Baltic Sea

The coxswain brought the engines of the black inflatable boat to life. “Inflatable” was misleading as the boat had a rigid fiberglass hull and three 200-hp outboard engines mounted on the stern. It was built for speed. And utility. This night required both.

Eight other men, dressed identical to the boat’s driver in black military-type uniforms and black tactical gear, boarded the boat in twos. Six of them took positions around the outside of the boat and adjusted their ling-carried automatic rifles and leg-holstered pistols. A seventh passenger stowed extra cargo in the area just behind the bow, covered it with a small blanket, and kneeled down on it, holding onto the small line that ran the length of the boat on both sides. They were preparing for the bumpy ride.

The eighth man quickly verified that all were ready, by a thumbs-up signal from each of the others. When he was satisfied, he pulled his knit cap down tight and tapped the coxswain on the shoulder. The man at the bow tossed the mooring line to the pier, gave a signal to the driver, and the boat pulled away. When the bow was pointed down the channel and the engines were sufficiently far away from the dock, the coxswain opened up the throttled and the boat shot out of the harbor and into the open water under cover of darkness.

A sliver of moon provided little help as the MV *Baltic Venture* made her way through the Kattegat, past the Danish island of Laeso. It was mid-summer and the air was clear. But it was dark. The deck officer on watch scanned the horizon, looking for any unexpected obstacle that might pose a danger as the ship steamed towards the North Atlantic Ocean and the second leg of the planned voyage. He enjoyed this time of night—this time of year. It would be better when they cleared these confined waters.

“Confined” was relative. The northern part of the bay between Norway and Denmark was reasonable large, but to a 130-meter container/cargo ship, the more room one could put between the ship and land the better. The deck officer lowered his binoculars and checked the radar screen. Everything looked fine. On the digital navigation screen, the triangle graphic representing the ship’s position was tracking nicely along the course the ship’s navigator had entered three days ago, before they left Kaliningrad.

Kaliningrad was a Russian port in that part of Russia that shouldn't be part of Russia. Located on the southern Baltic Sea and sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, the area of Kaliningrad Oblast seemed almost out of place. Kaliningrad Oblast was growing faster, economically, than any other part of the Russian Federation thanks to a dampening of corruption and a special relationship with the European Union. That was not to say that corruption did not exist. There were certainly elements of organized crime and petty criminals that still operated in the province, but they were not apparent to most observers and virtually non-existent to the average citizen. Kaliningrad was also a strategic part of the Russian military complex. A staging area for tactical nuclear weapons, this part of non-Russia was also the home of Russia's Baltic Fleet at Kaliningrad Chkalovsk.

The *Baltic Venture* used the port of Kaliningrad to have badly needed repair work done to the lower hold. A cargo of cement construction blocks had broken free during heavy seas two years earlier and tore through an inner bulkhead, badly denting several steel frames. The deck officer wondered why the ship owners waited this long to repair the damage, but he understood economics enough to know that until water began pouring in and the ship could no longer make port on time, meaning lost revenue, the *Baltic Venture* would continue to deliver goods. He figured the owners finally had enough money to look after their 1,600-ton investment, and they could afford to keep the ship in harbor for the three weeks.

He didn't mind. It was nice to have some time off. Especially after he had to supervise the cargo offload so the repairs could be made. There was some kind of problem with the stevedore contract about when the ship needed to be offloaded and when the repairs were to begin. That meant the ship's crew had to work the offload themselves, using only the onboard cranes. What should have been a one-day job took them four. As reward for all of their hard work, the captain, who had only just signed on with the ship before she left Finland, gave the crew a break. The captain personally supervised the reloading after the repairs were complete, including the addition of three shipping containers of Mercedes Benz the manifest said were official vehicles purchased by the Algerian government. The deck officer was won over immediately. It had been a long time since he sailed with a skipper who looked after his crew. Too many captains seemed to only be in it for the money, which was quite good by most standards. They acted more like irritated bus drivers than someone responsible for the lives of their crews and the safety of their vessels.

When the deck officer returned to the ship after a week with a nice Russian university student on holiday, the ship was already loaded, and he was ready to go.

The helmsman yawned loudly and broke the silence that engulfed the bridge. The deck officer looked up from the monitor and smiled. "Need coffee?" he asked the seaman at the ship's wheel.

"I'm okay. It is only two in the morning. Ask me again in three hours, and I will say yes."

The deck officer smirked. There were only four of the twenty crewmembers awake this time of night—two engineers, the helmsman, and himself. Sometimes it was hard to stay focused or even

awake when the ship was so quiet. He turned his attention back to the windows at the front of the bridge and could just make out the bow past the cargo of timber and shipping containers that occupied most of the vessel. He shined his red-filtered flashlight at his wristwatch and checked the time. Three more hours and the cooks would start making breakfast. His stomach grumbled audibly at the thought.

The black boat reduced speed and slipped quietly into the wake of the *Baltic Venture*—the noise a low steady rumble. The eight passengers settled onto the deck now that they were no longer holding on for dear life. For thirty minutes they had run full-out, all three outboard engines redlined. The information they were given had been correct. The cargo ship was right where it was supposed to be.

The engines of the *Baltic Venture* muted the sound of the approaching speedboat, and the darkness of a near-moonless night helped mask the quiet approach. They were only 100 yards astern of the large vessel as Viktor Egorov looked forward. His only fear was that some insomniac peckerhead would be aft by the mooring winches smoking a cigarette and notice their approach.

Fifty yards in front of them was the last swirling mass of bubbles caused by the turning of the ship's propeller. The screw agitated microscopic bioluminescent creatures, creating an eerie green glow that added to the muted white of the bubbles. Viktor's grandfather once told him that the green glow was the gates of Hell opening up to take a soul to eternal damnation. *Stupid old fool.*

The speedboat moved across the turbulent water, momentarily making them vulnerable to detection by the contrast of the black boat and black-clad passengers against the white and green. The boat moved up the port side of the *Baltic Venture*. The cargo ship would provide a lee, blocking the north-northeast wind and allowing them to come alongside with relative ease.

The coxswain deftly maneuvered the speedboat just forward of the ship's superstructure. The freeboard between the main deck of the ship and the water was already low because of the full load of cargo, and opening used for staging the accommodation ladder made it even lower where the speedboat settled in and matched the *Baltic Venture's* speed. The man at the bow uncovered the gear he had stowed there and tossed a grappling hook just over the edge of the deck. He gave a quick pull to secure the hook onto the ship. A chain ladder hung down from the hook, and one after the other, the men exited the speedboat and made their way onboard the ship. In less than ninety seconds, the eight men were aboard, and the black rubber/fiberglass boat turned wide to port and sped off to the south.

The men in black moved quickly to either side of the superstructure and split into three teams. The first group of three entered the white tower that contained both living quarters and control rooms and went down toward the engineering nerve center. The second group of three men

negotiated the stairs and ladders of the port side while the final two went up the starboard side. It took two minutes to reach the bridge.

“Good morning, sir,” Viktor said, his gun aimed at the center of the deck officer’s head as the five men simultaneously entered the pilothouse. He relished the initial surprise. Only on first contact did he allow himself to play out the Hollywood script. “Please do not make any noise, or it will be the last noise you ever make.”

After that, the hijacking was all business.

Chapter 2

Savannah, Georgia

Casey Shenk finished loading up the dolly and pulled the cargo door down on the back of the company truck. A white GMC Vandura, the box truck was a real piece of shit. A few weeks after he got the job running a vending machine route in Savannah, Georgia, he asked the company owners for a new vehicle. Not only did he have to buy a new battery and replace the wiring for the brake lights within the first two days, the cable to the roll-up cargo door snapped and nearly took his head off as it crashed down at 200 mph. That was in the first four days.

He was duly reimbursed for all the work he did on the truck, which allowed him to continue making deliveries. It also kept the company from having to buy him a new vehicle. Casey was non-confrontational by nature, having learned early on that you must pick and choose your battles. The truck was a battle he decided not to fight, so for five years he kept driving it. He figured it was only a matter of time before the engine gave out, and he was stranded on I-95 with melting Zero bars and defrosting Hot Pockets. Surely the company would give in then.

Casey walked through the automatic door of the K-Mart and made his way to the employee break room. It was small, compared to Home Depot or Best Buy, but unlike some break rooms, he could at least maneuver the dolly to the vending machines without any trouble.

“Hey, honey. Got anything new this week?” an overweight woman asked him when he came in the room.

“Afternoon, Mary. I got some new old stuff,” he said as he took out his keys and opened the snack machine.

Mary laughed. “You crazy, boy. Tanya, ain’t he crazy?” Mary was talking to a younger woman sitting at the table next to her. Tanya nodded her head, but she was more interested in watching Jerry Springer on the television set sitting on a bracket nailed high on the wall. She ate a bag of M&Ms, eyes glued to the screen while Jerry’s stage guards tried to keep a woman from mauling her husband who just informed the world that he was the father of both her sister and her niece.

Casey made sure he stayed out of Tanya’s view of the television screen. No sense upsetting the quiet one.

Mary wiped her mouth with a napkin after she took a bite of her sandwich. Without waiting until she was done chewing her food, she asked, “Mr. Casey, you seen that new girl workin’ the register over by perfume? She single, you know.” She smiled mischievously, revealing the contents of her sandwich painted on her tobacco-stained teeth.

“Come on, Mary. You know I just got over my last relationship.” Casey finished restocking the chips and pulled out the shelf with the chocolate bars. “Besides, I don’t think I’m ready for a commitment.”

“Boy, I ain’t sayin’ you gotta marry the girl, you should just ask her for a date. ‘Sides, you dated since ole girl left. Don’t tell me you ain’t, cause Tanya here seen you with a girl last month.”

“That was my sister.”

Mary almost choked on her sandwich she hadn’t quite finished swallowing. “You got some kinda lovin’ family then, cause Tanya says you was tryin’ to get a taste what that girl had for breakfast, you was kissin’ her so hard! Ain’t that right Tanya?”

Tanya didn’t answer. Jerry’s bouncers didn’t do a very good job trying to contain the anger of the 200-pound jilted wife, and the cheating husband was knocked out cold on the stage with a torrent of blood gushing from his freshly cracked skull. Casey pushed the shelf in and shut the machine. Maybe the man on Springer was the lucky one, Casey thought. A chair to the head right now would be better than listening to Mary dissect his love life, or lack thereof.

He locked the snack door and turned to the soda machine next to it. “Mary, why are you always trying to play matchmaker for me?” Casey asked as he started loading Coke bottles.

“I ain’t always trying to hook you up, Casey. I just think you could use a good woman.”

“You’re not always trying to hook me up?” He put down the crate of grape Fanta he had just taken off of the dolly and turned to Mary. What about that girl Sherrie from the KFC? Or Laura who works over at the fabric store down the street? Or your cousin Detta?”

Mary balled up her brown paper lunch bag and tossed it into the trash can behind her. She brushed her hands together, moving the crumbs from her palms to the front of her loud, flower-covered blouse. “And how many of them did you go out with?” she asked, squinting her eyes slightly, her stare boring into Casey’s tired gaze.

“None.”

“That’s right. None.” She leaned back in her chair as much as her Twinkie-sculpted figure would allow. “If you did go out with any of them, you might be a settled down family man now. Instead you go chasin’ ho’s in a bar—anything in a short skirt with blonde hair who give you the time of day.”

“Bullshit, Mary,” Casey said. He didn’t want to fight with Mary. She was about the only one who paid any attention to him on his vending route, and Casey didn’t have many other people he considered friends, or at least friendly. He turned back to the soda machine and closed it up. “I’ve dated exactly three girls since Jennifer left Savannah. Three. The longest for about two months.” He stacked the baskets of unused snacks onto the dolly and turned to leave. “Nobody else feels right. It’s like I had my one chance and let her get away. I guess God meant for me to just be a bachelor, filling your vending machines.”

“Well, I’m just sayin’ you need to git you a good woman and make a family. You’re too lonely. Mary can tell. It ain’t even one o’clock and you look like a mule done kicked you in the nuts. You need somethin’ else beside your chips and soda, and you keep looking in the past for somethin’ ain’t there no mo’ like you do, you gonna get old real quick. And growin’ old by yourself with nobody there to laugh wit’ when you start havin’ to wear diapers again? That ain’t no fun.” Casey laughed along with Mary.

He looked at Tanya and tossed a pack of M&Ms in her lap.

“Thanks,” she said without taking her eyes off of the TV.

“Look, Mary. I appreciate your concern, but really, I’m fine. I’ll find somebody someday,” Casey reassured Mary. “When I stop comparing every possible girlfriend to Jennifer, then I guess I’ll be ready. Besides, I’m not worth worrying over, trust me. Save all those good intentions for your customers,” he told her, pointing his thumb over his shoulder toward the door. Casey looked at his watch. “Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be getting back to work?”

“Honey, they pay me minimum wage. Mary’s only gonna give ‘em minimum work,” she chuckled. “I’ll see you next week Mr. Casey. You take care.”

Casey moved out the break room door and turned around to pull the dolly through. “You too, Ms. Mary,” he replied with a smile on his face as he walked toward the exit. When the door shut behind him he heard Mary get in her last parting shot.

“Brown sugar in perfume! She ain’t working this weekend neither!”

On the way back to the warehouse, Casey’s mind drifted to a happier time in his life. Then, in a flash, it brought him vividly to the worst day of his life. After Jennifer left Savannah, Casey was lost. He couldn’t even concentrate on the good times they had together because his thoughts, more correctly, his emotions, always fast forwarded to the day she left. “I’m a goddamn basket case,” Casey said to no one in particular. Even Paul Harvey replays on the radio couldn’t put him at ease.

Thank God K-Mart was the last stop of the week.

He pulled the delivery truck through the gate of the A-1 Self-Storage and parked in front of B-15. The “warehouse” was a medium-size storage garage stuck between 200 similar garages in the one-level town of A-1. Every Tuesday, before he left for his first delivery of the day, he filled out an inventory sheet of what was remaining in the warehouse and an order sheet of what he needed to restock. On Thursday, the boxes of food and crates of soda, along with his paycheck, would magically appear in the warehouse while he was on his route. He never had to talk to anyone.

After he finished the seemingly endless counting and clocked out Casey got in his faded green and white two-tone Chevy 1500 pick-up and headed for home. The irony of the similarity between

the truck he loved and the truck he hated was not lost on him. At least his pick-up had a cassette player. He reached in the glove box and came up with Jimmy Cliff.

“That’ll work,” he said and put the tape into the dashboard. One verse into “The Harder They Come,” and he had completely forgotten about vending machines, Mary, and Jennifer. For the moment, Casey was content with his life and the rhythmic routine that guided it.

Just before the Wilmington River, Casey turned right and drove through one of the quietest parts of town. There were only a handful of houses on his street that were built after 1940, and most were a couple of decades older than that. That didn’t mean they were the Revolutionary War-era buildings that permeated Savannah and gave it the old river-town charm that brought tourists from around the world. The houses were just old. Not antique—old.

A few blocks down, Casey eased the old truck into the dirt parking lot of The Sunset Tavern. It was only four o’clock in the afternoon, but in Thunderbolt, the weekend started early. Casey was a regular at the Sunset. He came in about three nights every week, and on Friday he stopped for a beer to toast the beginning of 61 hours away from the monotonous world of the vending business.

The Sunset Tavern was a dark, low-key watering hole that relied on local business. Tourists occupied most of the other drinking establishments in the Savannah area, especially those that cluttered Bull and River streets and the myriad squares designed into the city’s planning by its founder, James Oglethorpe. The out-of-towners who ventured to Thunderbolt were usually just stopping for gas on their way to or from Tybee Island, and the Sunset Tavern was not on the list of places to see.

The name of the tavern was a misnomer as the building faced east not west. Anyone looking to catch a view of the sunset while having a drink on the back patio would be sorely disappointed, because the thick cluster of pine trees surrounding three quarters of the tavern cast shadows over the whole place as early as five p.m. in the summer—even earlier after daylight savings time ended. The view of the river from the front of the tavern was forever obscured five years earlier when a seven-floor apartment complex was built at the water’s edge for wealthy snowbirds to have a place to keep their boats. There were only two permanent residents, and the rest of the apartments remained sixty percent vacant even during the busiest holiday seasons.

Casey opened the front door, the squeaking hinges announcing his arrival. The air was still fresh despite the distinct smell of once-lacquered wood that mixed with the used Naugahyde scent from the stools and chairs that populated the room. The open windows would be shut at dusk to keep out the legions of hungry mosquitoes that were as much a part of the landscape in Savannah as the giant oaks and Spanish moss. But for now, the incoming breeze made the Sunset Tavern feel more like an old friend’s living room than a bar.

“Hi Casey,” Maude called out from behind the bar when she saw him walk in. Maude was the owner of the Sunset, along with her husband, Geoff. She was drying some wine glasses she had just

washed and was placing them on the shelf behind her. Because Happy Hour didn't start for another thirty minutes, Maude seconded as the lone bartender until the regular staff showed up for the evening festivities.

"Hey, Maude," Casey replied. He walked up to the bar and took a seat on the stool next to Jas Fillmore. "Howdy, Jas," Casey said as he put his hand on the old man's shoulder and, with the other hand, grabbed the beer Maude had placed in front of him. "Anything big happen in the world today?"

Jas was the local fountain of knowledge when it came to television news. He retired a long time ago, though no one was really sure when. And ever since his wife passed away, not long after he retired by some accounts, he always came to the Sunset Tavern as soon as the door was unlocked. Whether it was open for business or not, if someone was inside and could pour him a drink, Jas was there, glued to whatever cable news show was on TV. Casey wondered how Jas survived before the advent of the 24-hour news channel.

"Brett Favre retired again. There was a mudslide in India killed 134 people. Some poor bastard in Iowa got his legs chopped off in one of them wheat farmin' tractors. That's about all the big news. Kinda slow today."

Casey laughed and took another pull on his beer bottle, and Jas asked Maude for another Scotch. The Sunset Tavern was always dead this time of day, but that made for the perfect atmosphere for relaxing after the work week was finished. Casey got up and went to the jukebox. He fished a quarter out of his pocket and dialed in 8713 and went back to his stool. As soon as he sat down, the soothing sounds of Ray Charles' "Georgia on My Mind" came dripping from the speakers around the tavern. Casey knew Jas didn't mind the added noise, not only because he liked the song, but because he'd seen the same news stories repeated over and over for the past three hours. Jas only kept focused on the television in case some late breaking news was announced.

Casey closed his eyes and just listened to the song. Ray's words always made Casey homesick, even when he was home. His father, whom he loved and admired more than anyone else, never cared for the song. He felt it was too commercially cheesy—Casey's words, not his dad's—and too many people, the state government more than anyone, had ruined the song for him through overuse and exploitation, no matter how good it was. Casey smiled at the thought of his father getting so worked up whenever the song rudely made its way, uninvited, onto the radio waves coming into his Oldsmobile.

Casey shifted on the bar stool and finished his beer.

"Want another one, sweetie?" Maude asked.

Casey looked at his watch and then examined the empty bottle in front of him. "No thanks, Maude. I better head home. I'll be back later tonight, though," Casey promised her. He put some money down on the bar and was just getting ready to leave when Jas spoke up.

“Some pirates captured another ship,” he announced. Casey looked at the television, and sure enough, the headline in the corner announced that a ship had been hijacked. The picture of the ship showed that it wasn’t an American ship, though, which made Casey wonder why it had even made headlines in the States.

“Maude, could you turn it up a little, please?”

Maude picked up the remote control from behind the bar and raised the volume on the set.

“...only just hearing about it today. While hijackings are not uncommon, as we have seen around the coast of Somalia in recent years, vessels being captured in the Baltic Sea around Denmark or Sweden is almost unheard of,” the man on the TV pontificated.

“Interesting,” Casey mused. He checked his watch again. *I should get a nap in before tonight*, he thought.

He turned back towards the door and waved to Maude. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll see you in a few hours. Mr. Jas, you going to the Sand Gnats on Sunday?” he asked the old man, who hadn’t taken his eyes off of the breaking news report.

“Like always.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then. Bye now.” Casey walked back out into the sunlight and squinted while he got into his truck. He was home in less than two minutes. After checking the mailbox to ensure no bills had arrived while he was gone, he went into the house where the long day in the delivery truck and the cool beer at Maude’s caught up with him like a punch in the face. He paused at the entrance to his spare bedroom. An aura of pain and suffering surrounded the Bowflex home gym in the corner of the room. Casey imagined it must have been the same menacing feeling that surrounded the iron maiden of the Middle Ages or the electric chair in 1950s America.

I should work out, he thought. He was saved, however, from an hour of certain agony in the name of health and vanity by the sweet call of slumber coming from the other room. Casey chose pleasure over pain and collapsed on his bed. He was asleep before he could even think about removing his shoes.

Chapter 3

The Sunset Tavern was a different place. It never ceased to amaze Casey how a mere five hours could change his oasis of post-vending relaxation into a loud, raucous frat party. Perhaps that's a bit of an exaggeration, but the Friday night crowd was definitely a more diverse sampling of Savannah demographics than the Happy Hour clientele.

The Sunset Tavern's close proximity to Savannah State University ensured there was always a healthy gathering of college coeds. Groups from Armstrong Atlantic and the Savannah College of Art and Design, or SCAD to insiders and locals, helped represent the cross-town college population. But the Sunset was not a "meat market" in the sense that the renowned retro-themed Hip Huggers was. There was not a large contingent of Army Rangers from nearby Fort Stewart or desperate women trying to snag one of the clean-cut boys in green.

What set Friday night at the Sunset Tavern apart from other lively drinking establishments in the area was the fact that, despite the college kids, the locals were always in attendance. From lawyers, of which there seemed to be more and more, to shrimpers, of which there seemed to be less and less, to the average citizen, like Casey, content with a dead-end, yet necessary, 9-to-5 job, the Sunset was a popular gathering place for those with a lasting stake in the Savannah tapestry.

Casey scanned the room when he walked in and found who he was looking for. He made his way to the table where Mike and Chip were trying to con two young ladies into not-so-long lasting relationships they would both regret in the morning. That is, the shapely blondes that Casey guessed were college juniors at best, most probably sophomores with fake IDs, would be the ones with the regrets.

As long as Casey had known Mike Tunney, he had never known him to trouble himself with consequences. Chip Walton, on the other hand, was harmless. He was utterly devoted to Mrs. Walton and their two children, Piper and Tristan. His wife let him go out as Mike's wingman on most Friday nights, just so he could be reminded of where he would be if it weren't for her. Chip took the weekly lesson on board, and although he loved Mike as a brother and had been his best friend since childhood, he knew exactly what he had waiting at home.

Mike's face lit up in mock surprise when he saw Casey. "Dude! Sit down, man!" He reached up and grabbed Casey's hand, motioning him to an empty seat across the table.

“Hey, Mike. Hey, Chip,” Casey said as he sat down. He noticed the place was only about three-quarters full and looked over at Chip. “Where is everybody?” he asked while he looked around in search of a waitress.

“Todd Snider’s playing a sunset gig over on Tybee,” Chip replied. It’s only nine-thirty, so people should be rolling in here in a little while. It’ll be packed this time in two weeks when the rest of the college kids start classes.”

“Yes, sir. If you sing it, they will come,” Mike quipped, motioning to the stage at the rear of the room where two bare-chested guys were performing a drunken rendition of Jimmy Buffett’s “Margaritaville” to the delight of a table of young women. Jocks by the look of them, Maude was not the least intimidated as she tried to use reason and strong language to get the boys to put their shirts back on.

Casey laughed and turned back to his friends. “Guess they started a little too early, huh?”

“No. They’re just asses,” one of the blonde sisters offered.

“Football seniors,” chimed in the other one. She eyed Casey for a reaction as she coyly sipped a hurricane through a blue-and-white straw. Casey began to feel a little uncomfortable under the young girl’s obviously flirtatious scrutiny. Luckily, Mike noticed his friend’s situation and came to the rescue.

“Oh man, I’m sorry. Girls, this is Casey. Casey, these are the girls. Ladies, you’re gonna have to help me out here because, honestly, I can’t remember y’all’s names.”

“I’m Trish,” said the green-eyed one who still had her gaze fixed on Casey.

The other girl threw a venomous look at Mike, stood up and grabbed her drink. “C’mon, Trish. Let’s go sit somewhere else. I’m sure there’s some guys here who aren’t collecting social security. I bet they’ll even remember our names after ten minutes.” Trish did as she was told and followed her friend away from the table.

“Hey, babe, don’t be like that. Stay a while. I’m sorry. I’ll buy you a drink!” Mike pleaded as the girls disappeared in a crowd of people on the other side of the room.

Mike picked up his beer and took a drink and sighed. “Damn, Chip. We were that close to scoring some blonde cheerleader ass.” His smile faded as he took another sip and stared pensively at the center of the table. “Fuck ‘em. There’s better fish out there.”

“That’s what she said,” Casey commented.

Chip sprayed beer around the table as he burst out laughing mid-drink. “She did! She really said that Mike.” Casey smiled, happy that at least Chip got his play on words by twisting a phrase he often heard from the college crowd.

“She said, ‘Fuck ‘em. We’ll go find someone else.’ That was a good one, Casey.” Chip started to catch his breath. Mike showed no signs of even hearing Chip or Casey.

“Dude, how many joints did he have already?” Casey asked Chip, as if they were doctors concerned about their comatose patient.

“I don’t know. Four maybe? He wasn’t bad when we got here, but he had three tall gin and tonics before he started on the beer. I think all that ain’t mixin’ right in his head,” Chip diagnosed.

Casey shrugged his shoulders and looked around the tavern. The lone waitress was busy taking orders from the Buffett Brothers and the table full of their adoring fans. He stood up and pushed his chair in to keep it from getting swiped. “I’m going to the bar to get a drink. Barbara looks like she’s got her hands full.”

“Yeah, it’s just her on the floor tonight. Sam called in sick,” Chip explained.

“Y’all need anything?” Casey asked before he headed to the bar.

“I’ll take one,” Mike said, weakly raising his bottle to offer proof of its lack of contents. He was still staring blankly at nothing, trying to come to grips with the gremlins that seemed to be re-wiring his brain, affecting his cognitive abilities.

“I’m good, thanks,” replied Chip. Part of his bargain with his wife meant he would have no more than two drinks the whole night, so he made sure he nursed his beer. The one time Chip came home at twelve-thirty, after having three beers over a six-hour period, his wife let him have it. *How did she know?* Chip asked himself that night. He never found out how she kept track of his alcohol indiscretions that night, but he never wanted to test her again, and so he continued to follow the rules they agreed upon.

Casey went to the same spot at the bar where Jas sat to watch the news every afternoon. While Steve the Bartender, that was how he wanted people to refer to him, went to the cooler for two Rolling Rocks, Casey glanced up at the television. The volume was muted so it would not take away from the performances of the karaoke heroes on the stage. A third-rate version of a fifth-rate bootleg of “The Dance” added an awful, if not comical soundtrack to the silent news reports.

Casey watched a picture of the same ship Jas told him had been hijacked. He focused on the scrolling text beneath the images to try and decipher the story behind the file footage of what the captions said was the MV *Baltic Venture*. He read that the ship was on its way from Finland to Algeria with a shipment of lumber.

“Seven-fifty,” Steve the Bartender said as he set the bottles in front of Casey and removed the caps.

Casey laid a ten-dollar bill on the bar without looking away from the news. “Warships to find missing ship and rescue hostages, Russian officials say – AP,” the next part of the ticker informed. Casey stopped watching as footage of Tiger Woods sinking a bunker shot and giving a fist pump indicated that the world of sports would be covered for the next ten minutes. He pocketed his change sans a one-dollar tip, grabbed the beer bottles, and rejoined his friends.

“Thanks, man,” Mike said as Casey put the green bottle in front of him. He had come out of his stoned, catatonic state for the moment and was working on the bowl of peanuts on the table.

“Welcome back,” Casey said and sat down. “You need to lay off that shit, man. You’re getting too old to be sneakin’ roaches from your ash tray every break you get.”

“Man, there’s lots of dudes still smoke weed when they’re like, seventy. And I’m only thirty-two. You should try it sometime. You’re not in the Navy anymore, so you don’t have to worry about a piss test.”

“Whatever, Mike.” Casey hated when he got on his soap box and started lecturing his friend about his bad habits. Especially when Casey knew he had his own issues to deal with. Mike was his friend, after all, not his kid. But he thought Mike would be better off without the pot. “Anyway, how’d the crew do this week?”

Mike was glad his friend dropped it, even though he barely listened anymore when Casey started lecturing him. “Not bad. Wassaw’s kickin’ ass this year, but I bet we’ll find more turtles next week when I’m out there. Jody’s lazy. She’ll spend all night on one nester and have the whole group gathered around to watch instead of sending some people down the beach to find more. We missed seven nests so far this season, all on her weeks.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, but we still have almost twice as many as Sapelo and St. Simons, combined. You should come out with me this week, Casey.”

Casey thought he could use a week on the island, away from vending machines, but responsibility got the better of him. “Can’t, man. Thanks for the invite, though.”

“Shit. Those fat-asses could get by with one week and no Ding Dongs. Just call in sick.”

“I can’t, man, I told you. I gotta keep clocking time so I can get a week off at Christmas. My mom’s been hounding me because I only live an hour away, and I never come to visit them. I’m going to surprise her by showing up at her doorstep with a suitcase on Christmas Eve. After a week, she’ll probably want me to go back to Savannah and not come back until next Christmas.”

“Okay. Hell, it ain’t gonna be any fun anyway,” Mike said. “We got a crew of Boy Scouts and four retired teachers coming out. I don’t think I can handle it if there aren’t any hotties out there to flirt with.”

The three men laughed at the thought of Mike stuck on Wassaw Island all week with a bunch of pre-pubescent boys and old ladies. Even Mike saw the humor in it.

“Well, since you’re not coming out, would you still be able to drive one of the boats out there and drop us off?” Mike asked.

“Sure, what’s the catch?” Whenever Mike asked Casey for a favor, there was almost always a catch.

“Well, for one, I would need you to come get some of the group next Saturday and bring them back. Fred Anders is driving the other boat, but I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind checking out the choke setting on the Honda before then. It kept stalling on me last week when I put it in idle. I tried to adjust it myself and now it’s running at about four thousand rpm. Constantly. It’ll make it out there and back but I don’t think it’s good for the engine to be running that high all the time. You’re better at that engine shit than I am.”

“You’re right about that,” Casey laughed. “I mean the engine shouldn’t rev that high at idle.” One of the things the Navy taught Casey was how to rebuild, repair, and maintain boat engines. Inboard and outboard. Aside from the many benefits he gained from his time as an Engineman in terms of growing up, learning responsibility and leadership, and all the rest of the standard-issue recruiting hooks, Casey walked away with one of the best educations in small boat maintenance in the country. “Sure, I’ll take you.”

“Thanks, dude. I asked this numb-nuts over here,” Mike threw a handful of peanuts at Chip who was enraptured with a comely brunette belting out Melissa Etheridge in a raspy, seductive voice on the karaoke stage, “but he’s gotta take the kids to tee-ball camp.”

Chip turned back to the others and said, by way of explanation to Casey and excuse to Mike, “Laura’s gotta work. She’s showing four houses tomorrow. Two at Modena on Skidaway. Do you know what kind of commission she could pull in? Hell yeah, I’m watching the kids.” He emptied the last of his beer and picked up the glass of water next to it and took a sip. He didn’t even notice the faucet of condensation that poured from the glass to his lap as he drank while shifting his focus back to Melissa Etheridge.

Casey and Mike looked at each other and laughed. They were three completely different people. But the phrase “opposites attract” applies to friends as much as it does to lovers. At least it did in their case.

When Melissa was finished, Casey asked, “Did either of y’all hear about the ship that got hijacked last week?”

“In Savannah?” Chip asked.

“No, in the Baltic Sea.”

“That’s more like a lake than a sea, isn’t it?” Mike asked with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s the *Black* Sea, dumb-ass. And you’re right. The Black Sea is more of a big lake, if you ask me. No, the Baltic is up between Sweden and Germany—that area.”

“Didn’t hear a damn thing, Mr. Wizard,” Mike said as he drank some more of his beer. “So what happened?”

“Well, it got hijacked,” Casey said. “That’s no big deal. What’s strange though, is that nobody gets hijacked up there. Not since like, the Vikings.”

“Was it al Qa’ida?” Chip asked, enthusiastically interested now that the stage was occupied by a homely coed in a sun dress that was two decades out of date singing an old Tammy Wynette tune.

“No,” Casey answered. “Those guys aren’t subtle enough to pull off a hijacking on the open ocean. The media gives them too much credit. I don’t know who did it, but the Russians just sent five Navy ships to go find it.”

“Find it?” Chip asked.

“Yeah. Nobody knows where it is.”

“That’s kinda strange, isn’t it?” Chip asked. “You would think the people that took the boat would be asking for a ransom. With all the technology stuff the government has, they could just triangulate the position of where the call came from and figure out where it is, right?”

Casey chuckled at Chip’s simplistic view of the way the world operated. Not that Casey was a suave man of the world, but Chip had never lived out of Savannah. In fact, the farthest he had ever been from the city was when his parents took him and his sister to Six Flags in Atlanta one weekend. Most of what he knew of the world beyond the Georgia border came from movies he occasionally rented from Blockbuster.

“I don’t know, man. I just caught a little bit about it on the news over there,” he said, motioning to the TV by the bar. “I was just seeing if y’all knew anything else about it.”

Casey’s inquiry was cut short by the loud, off-key singing of a dozen people about their age in flower-print shirts and sandals, some with leis, some with straw hats, some with both, who barged in the door belting out the chorus to Todd Snyder’s “My Generation (Part 2).” The young lady on stage was visibly upset with the interruption of her spotlight performance and was pleading with Rosie, the bar’s KJ, to restart the song.

“Now we’re talking!” said Mike. “Time to find me a drunk beach girl who wants to take me to her car tonight.”

Casey laughed at his friend, but was still thinking about the *Baltic Venture*. “Well, good luck, sir,” he said as he got up to leave. “I’m gonna pack it in.”

“What are you leaving for, dude? The party’s just starting,” Mike protested.

“I’m not in the mood tonight, man. Plus I think I’m gonna go home and do some looking into that hijacked ship. Maybe it’ll make a good post.”

“Yeah, you haven’t posted anything in a couple of weeks, man,” Chip noted.

“You and that blog, dude. You’re wasting your life with that computer, I’m telling you,” Mike said, smiling because he finally got a chance to rib Casey for the same thing he was scolded for earlier. Mike had his marijuana, Casey had his blog. Mike didn’t see a difference.

“Alright, Mike. You got me. Well, you kids don’t stay out too late, now. Gotta get up early tomorrow. Chip, tell Laura and the kids I said hi. And Mike, I’ll see you at the Landings at seven-thirty?”

“I’ll be there. And thanks for helping out, Casey.”

“No problem. Later, guys.” Casey wormed his way through the now-crowded tavern to the door and began the five minute hike to his house.

Chapter 4

Once Casey left the parking lot of the Sunset Tavern, he couldn't keep his mind off of the *Baltic Venture* story. He wasn't sure why it intrigued him so much, but he thought there were too many questions that weren't answered, or even asked, by the news reporters. Casey figured the fact that "pirates" were mentioned in the story drew him to the incident in the first place. They weren't talking about Blackbeard or even Jack Sparrow, but they weren't talking about Somalia either. This was a case of The Pirates of the North Sea. Casey looked at it that way—like it was a mystery. A mystery that was current and real, and he enjoyed a good puzzle to solve. He smiled at the thought that sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction.

"You just can't make this shit up," he said to himself as he climbed the four steps to his front porch and found the keyhole to open the door to the house. He turned on the lamp by the doorway and made his rounds, turning on the three lamps in the living room and the two in his bedroom. The only overhead lights he used in the house were in the kitchen and the bathroom. Casey thought they made the other rooms too bright and preferred the homey feeling that lamps gave out.

Casey opened the refrigerator and removed a Diet Coke from a shelf on the door. He closed the fridge and retrieved a half-eaten box of Triscuits from the counter by the sink, mentally scolding himself for leaving the box open and hoping they weren't stale. He sat in the folding lawn chair in front of his laptop computer and moved the mouse to wake it from its hibernation. He checked his e-mail and studiously deleted the thirty or so unwanted solicitations. That left him with only two. One was from his mom, telling him all about the trouble she was having with the neighborhood landscaping committee who was pressuring her to remove the skeleton and styrofoam gravestones from her front yard. She argued that there were no real holidays between the 4th of July and Halloween, so why should they care if she was getting a head start by putting out decorations in August? Casey laughed and opened the next message. This one was from The Lover's Guide, providing him with a weekly tip on how to satisfy his partner for a more meaningful and lasting relationship. Casey moved the e-mail to a designated folder on the computer desktop. He figured he would be able to put that advice to use just as soon as he found a partner to have a more meaningful and lasting relationship with. Someday, God willing. Tonight he was interested in something else.

Casey closed his e-mail and opened up the Google main page. He typed in the words "*MV Baltic Venture*" to see what came up. As expected, the top entries were reports from CNN, the Associated

Press, FOX News—all the regulars. He read each of the articles to see what information was the same, which was most of it, and what editorial twist, if any, the various news outlets took on the story. The standard facts were identical: cargo ship, Maltese flag, Finnish owned, heading for Algeria with a load of timber from Finland, 20 crewmembers who were mostly Russian citizens. Nothing breaking here that he hadn't gotten from the TV at the Sunset. He skimmed over the headlines of the next five pages of search results. Nothing else caught his eye. Casey let out an exasperated breath as he looked at the top of the computer screen and saw there were over 253,000 results for his search. He moved his cursor over the link to page 20 and skipped ahead. He noticed an overabundance of links to Baltic vacation packages and was beginning to feel frustrated. Maybe it was too early in the story development to expect anything more. After all, the media just found out about the reported hijacking today.

Casey stopped when he realized he had reached the bottom of the Triscuits box, the contents of which were only slightly stale, and licked his fingers clean. He stood up and drained the rest of his soda, wondering how drinking a Coke at almost midnight was even remotely going to help him get a good night's sleep. He threw away the can and empty box in the kitchen and went to the bathroom. When he returned, he sat down and modified his search criteria.

"ITAR-TASS Russia Baltic Venture." Casey hoped maybe he would get some better information from one of the countries with a direct stake in the hijacked vessel. This meant he needed to bypass the American news channels and go right for the source. While the computer searched for results, Casey quickly went to the kitchen and got another Diet Coke. He knew he shouldn't drink as many Cokes as he did, but he justified his addiction to himself by saying it wasn't as bad as smoking. He had kicked that habit shortly after he was discharged from the Navy. That was a tough battle. He knew giving up Diet Cokes would be infinitely harder.

"Bingo." Casey found what he had been looking for. Well more of what he was looking for, anyway. Luckily the Russians, and most foreign websites for that matter, provided an English translation of the entire site, which he accessed with one click of the British flag near the top of the browser window. He knew that with some sites, particularly the official government ones, you took a risk in being presented a different set of reports than those posted in the mother-tongue version. Casey didn't blame anyone. He figured some countries wanted to control what the rest of the world, at least those that didn't speak the native language, could read about their internal affairs. Those that needed to know would find out anyway, but why let Joe Shit the Ragman have more ammunition to use in his protests over their government.

The Russian media published the same basic information as the American reports about the MV *Baltic Venture*, but they included the fact that the ship was carrying various containers onboard, as well as the wood from Finland. None of the reports specified what was in the containers, but then again, there was nothing out of the ordinary about that either. Casey came across an interesting fact

in one of the smaller, independent Russian papers, a product of the death of Soviet Communism. Apparently the *Baltic Venture* stopped in some place called Kaliningrad between leaving Finland and being hijacked off of Denmark. Casey opened another tab on his internet browser and did a search for Kaliningrad to get the geography and basic demographics in his head. He went back to the other articles.

The only time he found Kaliningrad mentioned was in the one report from *Novaya Gazeta*. And even then there were only two sentences that stated the ship stopped there for scheduled repairs, and that the ship was there for three weeks before continuing on its voyage to Algiers. After that extra information, Casey's mind kicked into gear. He began asking himself the obvious questions that perplexed him. Some were asked by the media reports, particularly the American "experts" on the nightly news talk shows, but others were either overlooked or ignored.

First off, why was the ship hijacked to begin with? Second, who hijacked it? Also, most vessels were pirated for money, the Achille Lauro notwithstanding. The pirates want money either for the return of the cargo, the crew, or even the ship itself—usually for all three, although in this case the ship was over twenty years old and not likely going to fetch a large sum. So where was the ransom demand? According to the news reports, the ship had been missing, or last contact made, for almost a week. That's plenty of time for a ransom demand to be made. Even if the hijackers wanted to get to a safe place to wait, meaning away from the easy reach of the coast guards or other law enforcement agencies in the Baltic Sea, what could be safer than underway in the North Atlantic? Besides, with demands come negotiations, and those would take days to start. What if the hijackers anticipated a military response? It would still take time to mobilize that response. Again, time wasted for negotiations to avert such an option.

Casey sat back from the computer and reclined as much as he could in the metal and plastic-weave chair. He understood the motivation for people off of the Horn of Africa to pirate vessels. Those guys had the business end of ransom negotiations down to an art by now. But why the *Baltic Venture*? Casey stared at a file photo of the vessel that was open on his computer screen. How did all the pieces of this puzzle fit together?

Casey sat up, opened the report of the Russian warship deployment and re-sized the window to place it next to the ship's photo. His eyes went back and forth between the two, and his mind groped for the meaning of it all. A small spark of inspiration was attempting to fire his imagination. For two full minutes Casey sat in silence, his attention focused unwaveringly on the computer screen. "What if...?" kept repeating over and over again in his brain.

Ignition.

Casey minimized the windows on the computer and opened another web browser. He entered the address to access his personal blog space and logged in. *Stranger than fiction*, he thought as he began typing.