

Chapter 1

Washington, DC
August 20, 2017

What a perfect day for a ballgame! Past the halfway point in the season, the Washington Nationals were hosting the Milwaukee Brewers and hoping to improve their dismal forty-three wins and eighty losses record. Thousands of loyal fans would brave the stifling heat and drenching humidity to get to the Nationals Stadium for the last of the summer series. Washington would be starting up again after the long hot recess, and the pace would be unbearable by mid-September. People wearing ball caps with the stylish pretzel "W" and red baseball jerseys were swarming towards Southeast, Washington. The combat zone of the District of Columbia had been transformed in the late 1990s from a drug-infested slum to a vibrant neighborhood anchored by the stadium on one end and the re-furbished Navy Yard on the other. The Department of Transportation built an impressive headquarters building right on the water surrounded by loft apartments and several new hotels. Hundreds wedged into the Yellow Line train as it came up from the last underground stop at the Pentagon, banked to the left and emerged into the bright sunlight flooding the cars for the short trip over the Potomac. The rush to the Stadium started early.

The District Department of Transportation added two extra cars to the Yellow Line trains for game day to handle the large family crowds. None of these Yellow Line cars, including the extra ones, would make it to the next stop at L'Enfant Plaza. Just like one of those planned high-rise demolitions shown on TV, three of the Metro's heavy reinforced concrete bridge foundations were instantly pulverized in a perfectly timed series of massive underwater explosions designed to produce shear stresses which would destroy the thick bridge support structure, twist the tracks and tear them like a piece of tablet paper. The conductor had no time to react as the tracks suddenly veered to the right and downward like some amusement park ride.

His hands were still steady on the controls as he saw the muddy Potomac River rushing into view. Eight Yellow Line cars followed each other into the water. The sound of forty tons of steel and aluminum shearing and twisting drowned out the screams of the eager Nats fans, tourists, and weekend workers, as each car slammed into the car ahead, trying to find space for their seventy-five foot lengths in less than thirty feet of water. It was similar to the massive fog-induced collisions on highways in the West involving fifty automobiles or more, but turned on its head, vertically, with forty feet between the bridge and the water and another thirty feet to the bottom. Each of the eight cars carried well over one-hundred riders with several near their maximum capacity of one-hundred and seventy five. The last car landed on its back, speared in its mid-section by car number seven before breaking into two pieces which hesitated on the water's surface for several long seconds before sliding off on opposite sides and disappearing. There would be many no-shows in the Stadium today. Some died of blunt force trauma, others more slowly by drowning as their common metal caskets tumbled to the bottom and filled with muddy water. Many tried to escape by breaking the fixed windows on the way to the bottom. The large fixed picture windows separated the living from the dead by a thin piece of tempered glass about a quarter inch thick. The bodies thrown around inside the trains added to the panicked stampede of fear and caused scores of people to drown just beneath the surface. Ironically, the Nats won anyway.

Chapter 2

Bucharest, Romania
August 21, 2017

A city of stark contrasts, Bucharest's crumbling facades stood between strip malls and still wore the faded trappings of the brutal Communist dictatorship that kept the city at a stand-still for decades. It had been almost twenty years since Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu were given due process in a ninety minute trial and unceremoniously machine-gunned in the square on Christmas Day. Hundreds of the city's gritty survivors gathered to see the fitting end of a cold and ruthless dictator who robbed Romania's spirit and soul. The area around the bodies had been trashed and smelled strongly of urine. Empty bottles and cans littered the ground. A veteran limped up to the body of Elena and unloaded a mouthful of yellow spit onto her bare feet. Someone needing a pair of shoes had torn the cheap Russian loafers from the stiff limbs. They'd taken the socks too, marveling at how the feet were so clean and looked as though they'd been carved from a block of Italian marble. Up the street from the square stood the Athenee Palace Hilton Bucharest, a grand edifice resembling a stately government building from a bygone era. The magnificent structure had been architected by a German and built in 1914. Years of exhaust-borne dirt and grime stained its marble exterior.

Mr. Brown seemed an odd name for the dark, olive-skinned man who carried a United States passport and stayed a single night. The front desk clerk asked him if he needed any help with his luggage. He replied with a painful smile and a shake of his head, holding up a thick black engineers' flight bag. The automaton at the desk ushered him out with a cheery "Have a wonderful day!"

He walked out into the sunlight and turned right. Around the corner of the hotel past the casino were a series of apartments with first floor shops sharing a common roof and dirty, depressing brown stucco walls. The fourth store front housed an adult shop featuring live shows, magazines and videos and a large selection of toys. For months, people living in the squalor here noticed the acrid smell of chemicals. A local doctor observed a disquieting number of his patients complaining of migraine headaches. The authorities had been called several times, but nothing ever changed in Bucharest. The local police had the building under surveillance for several months but not because of the sudden onset of migraine headaches. No, there was another more sinister reason.

Mr. Brown took the ancient lift to the fourth floor and knocked on an unmarked door. A small man's head appeared as the door opened slowly and after recognizing the expected visitor, swung open wide. The man ushered him down the hallway into a large bedroom converted to a makeshift laboratory. Two men worked silently sealed in an inner room isolated by heavy translucent plastic sheeting that billowed the walls before it was evacuated through a connecting room. Inside the plastic cocoon, the open plastic drums emitted visible vapors that looked like a chemistry teacher's worst nightmare, but neither man paid any attention because they wore industrial air masks to complement their protective chemical suits. The familiar transaction was completed mechanically, wordlessly. Mr. Brown opened the flaps on the top of the hard-sided bag and banded bundles of Romanian Lei were replaced by two dozen plastic blocks which looked like oversized computer power supplies. The high grade C-4 explosive had been made without the taggant chemical to identify it. He nodded to the small man and left the bomb

boutique. He'd been there for less than five minutes. Now outside, he only needed to deliver the case to a locker at the train station and drop the key in the sharps box in the men's bathroom. A simple and straight-forward task with generous compensation and no W2 form required from an employer he would never meet. A dream job by any standard. Little did he know these power supplies would wreak havoc 5,000 miles away months later. On the other hand, he didn't really care.

Chapter 3

Doha, Qatar
August 22, 2017

It was very early in the morning but the wires were still full of news about the tragedy in Washington. Some commentators feebly speculated the Yellow Line disaster might be linked to America's crumbling infrastructure. Most questioned whether this could possibly be another terrorist act. The evening editor at Al Jazeera received a claim of responsibility from Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula within minutes of the event. But this attack was dramatically different than recent Al-Qaeda attacks. The editor picked up the phone and dialed a local number.

"Nadir?"

"Yes, who is calling me in the middle of the night?" The voice on the phone sounded irritated and confused, like someone being roused from a deep sleep.

"It's Khalid from Al Jazeera. I hope I didn't disturb you." The editor smiled knowing that whether Nadir was sleeping or busy with one of his wives or mistresses, he was disturbed. He said, "We got a message via the usual sources about the train attack in Washington. It seems like you are stepping up your campaign, and I wanted to see if you wanted to make any specific comment before we go to print? As always, you would not be identified." There was an uncharacteristically long pause before Nadir responded in a clipped voice.

"I will call you back."

Khalid drummed his pen on the desk and then sat back in his chair. Nadir's response was certainly not what he expected. Usually, he had a well-rehearsed script and talking points at hand, and such calls turned into a one-way press conference. The editor knew full well that Al Jazeera served as Al-Qaeda's bullhorn to the rest of the world. It was reality and he'd gotten over it. Real journalism had disappeared from the landscape and would not be appreciated by the masses anyway. Entertainment was today's stock-in-trade. The state of journalism and reporting aside, Khalid sensed Nadir was not on his game tonight. Nothing concrete could be gleaned from his response, but his long pause seemed strange. He dismissed the possibility of Nadir not being aware of such a large scale attack and filled his cup with American coffee left on the burner for hours. Strong and bitter, it would keep him alert until Nadir called back.

"Khalid?" The question came as the phone was answered.

"Yes."

Now fully engaged, Nadir rambled on for several minutes cursing the United States and exclaiming that the infidels just witnessed the first of many such attacks which would be coming to America's heartland. He ended the statement with one of his classic lines.

"Make no mistake; Al-Qaeda's strength and reach are growing daily. More people are ready to sacrifice everything for our holy cause. We are everywhere. You remember Paris in November last year? The worldwide caliphate is now a reality. My friend, how many more Yellow Lines will it take for America to wake up to the reality that they can never win this fight?"

Nadir delivered the diatribe in the familiar angry voice Khalid expected.

"Do you want to make any specific comments about this specific attack? The wire reports are projecting 300-400 casualties," asked the editor evenly.

There was another pause before the phone went dead.

Chapter 4

Boston, Massachusetts
October 15, 2017

The man enjoying a large black coffee pushed his right hand up under his glasses and pinched the corners of his eyes, leaned back in his chair and smiled confidently to himself. The West neither understood the enemy nor its tactics. Throwing money at problems worked against the Russians to end the Cold War almost thirty years ago. Everyone jumped on the bandwagon without even asking where it was going. Today, the US economy lacked the muscle to win a spending war of attrition.

He shook his head in disbelief and took another drink from the paper cup. Sure, the Anti-Terrorist units formed since 2001 were now tied together by a sophisticated intelligence-sharing network with instantaneous links to allies overseas. Coupled with the continued success of the drone campaign in Pakistan and Yemen, and the Special Operations units operating in Libya and elsewhere in Northern Africa, the mood in the United States had grown more confident but the continued high unemployment rate and a still-skittish stock market dominated the news.

Early candidates for the United States' 2016 Presidential campaign crowed about the Administration's success in breaking Al-Qaeda's back, and the nightly news pundits declared a cautionary victory against terrorists on virtually every front. Dealing with the savagery of ISIL proved problematic but even the horror of mass be-headings or immolations got only fleeting coverage. The liberal idea that things would improve on their own if only we would offer greater understanding and friendship had taken root, and those who advocated tighter borders and more government spending were all too often drowned out by the go along, get along press.

The story about a terrorist plot to carry out coordinated bombing attacks around central London appeared as a small sidebar near the back of Section A of the Boston Globe. The combined intelligence resources of the United States and Britain had been successful in uncovering the communications nodes used by Al-Qaeda and the hundreds of groups it had spawned since the 9/11 tragedy. Yet these successes were tested with much greater frequency than was reported in the press. Reflecting the political mood, the press slowed the linking of obvious terrorist events to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

ISIL proved to be cleverer with communications, using mosques for written communications which were then encoded and published in a string of newspapers unwittingly carrying orders in their "Help Wanted" or "For Sale" sections. Internet gaming provided a simple and undetectable means of global communications. At times almost complicit, the White House spin doctors all but outlawed the term terrorism, and the term's use in the same sentence with Islam or Muslims had risen to the level of a journalistic capital offense. While the task of preventing attacks remained a 24/7 effort involving thousands on both sides of the Atlantic, a cavalier attitude took hold on the United States' side of the effort. The people being protected seemed to take it for granted, something the government was expected to provide. The Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 brought home the reality that lay just under the surface of the pervasive calm. The terrorists could strike almost at will and nothing could prevent a well-planned attack from within.

The coffee was very good-hot and strong-warming him to face the blustery 35°F temperature of an early-winter afternoon in Boston. Draining the cup, the man stood and headed towards the

door, folding the paper and carefully adding it to others in the overflowing recycling bin. He tossed the cup into the trashcan, buttoned up a heavy dark topcoat and pulled on his gloves before pushing the glass against the bite of the wind. The cold numbed the exposed flesh on his face as he began walking up Boylston Street towards Boston Common. His pace was confident and leisurely, knowing a new type of terror had been unleashed that would cover the front page and have the pundits' back-peddling from their sanguine predictions. Day to day life would move from predictable to uncertain and fear would spread like wildfire.

He slid into a grimy Yellow cab and said "Logan."

The latest Al-Qaeda statement contained a dire prediction that in years to come, children in the United States would never see the American Flag flying at the top of the flagstaff. The pledge made it very clear. Al-Qaeda's objective was to make certain the Stars and Stripes would hang at half-staff each and every day.

Chapter 5

Washington, DC
October 22, 2017

Having just returned from a very successful G-7 meeting in Vienna where he'd reinforced cooperative efforts with allies on a range of issues including those related to both terrorism and cyber-security, President Samuel Chapman looked back on his first ten months in office with a pained satisfaction. He'd lived up to his campaign pledge to kick-start the economy with permanent tax cuts and ramrodded legislation through both houses which his party controlled. Sure, he had to make some promises, but the fact remained he'd done what he promised though at a terrible personal cost. Between the morning briefings, endless sidebars and the European penchant for late dinners each evening, he'd given all the energy he could muster to the recent overseas trip, including meeting separately with every journalist wanting to interview him. So it did not surprise his wife, Ann, when her husband started to fall asleep at the table during a quiet lunch on his first day back. After lunch, she suggested he take a nap. He protested feebly, and she walked him to the bedroom and made him promise to stay put. Minutes later, she buzzed his appointments secretary to have his afternoon schedule cleared. President Chapman lay down and fell asleep almost immediately. Sadly, he never woke up, suffering a massive heart attack within the hour.

The Chief Justice swore the Vice President, John Bowles, into office the same afternoon in a hasty ceremony concluded before Samuel Chapman's body lost the last of its internal heat.

Chapter 6

Virginia Beach, VA
November 10, 2017

Dan Steele felt a fleeting pang of regret as he walked down the glistening hallway of Seal Team Two Headquarters into the Commanding Officer's office. He knocked on the door as he entered the office.

"Good morning, sir."

Commander Hank Owens looked up from the stack of papers and charged around his desk, starting with a handshake that became a bear hug. The skipper steered Dan over to two brown leather arm chairs salvaged from the Pentagon years before when a newly-appointed Assistant Secretary ordered an immediate change in his office furniture.

"So tomorrow's the big day?"

"Yes sir," Dan said, with a wide grin on his face.

"We're going to miss you."

Dan studied the clean shaven square jaw and bright blue eyes that grabbed your attention and wouldn't let go. The meticulous white uniform was spotted with insignia. Dan's eyes went to the single row of ribbons the skipper wore. A handful of men still living wore the pale blue ribbon with five white stars...the Congressional Medal of Honor. The public citation for the award told a short hand story of how a US Navy Seal platoon had been pinned down on an isolated mountainside in Afghanistan that was deemed too dangerous for close air support or helicopter extraction. The mission ended with 11 of 12 Seals dying.

The skipper leaned back in the chair knowing that nothing he could say would change anything, but he still felt an obligation to try to keep the best Seal he'd ever served with in a Navy uniform.

"I know we've talked about it before. Even now, I can put the toothpaste back in the tube if you want to change your mind and stay."

Dan chuckled and tried to stay serious, but he'd prepared for this "Hail Mary."

"Skipper, I've made up my mind. It's my time to move on. I owe it to Jill and the boys."

The skipper changed course, asking, "What are your plans?"

"Nothing concrete yet. We'll leave tomorrow after the paperwork is completed and head-up to Jill's folks' house in Newport for a few days and then follow the coast up to Maine. I figure we'll take about 30 days to decompress and then we'll come back here and see what we want to do next. Jim Trainer is trying to expand his dive shop over in Chesapeake and told me I could help him for a few months before I start looking for something permanent."

"Nothing more specific? I've never known you not to have a plan!"

"I know, but I need some time to unwind and think things through."

"Have you got any leads? Hooking up with Trainer doesn't sound like a good option. Hell," the skipper said, shaking his head, "I bet you haven't even put together a resume."

His brow furrowed, Dan said, "You're right. I started a resume last week, but it's a little hard to translate Special Operations Force work into something that can be understood or even done in most workplaces. I don't think Walmart would be interested in my ability to turn anything into a weapon or subdue an irate customer with some gentle physical persuasion." Both men laughed.

"Well, there's no question you'll land on your feet. Look, I know a lot of people here in Tidewater so let me know if you need any help." The skipper knew Dan would do it on his own and would not ask for help. He was just that kind of person. He would do favors and offer assistance to anyone else and follow-through with it but would rarely ask any favors for himself.

Hank Owens reached for a small wooden box on the side table and handed it to Dan. The wood's finish was smooth and warm, crafted from a very dark, tropical-looking wood with yellow swirls interlaced with the growth rings. It seemed heavy for its size.

"It's made from quarter-sawn Bocote, a very dense and durable African wood."

Dan opened the box and saw a gleaming, black pocket knife. Dan lifted the knife, startled by its feather weight.

"The case is titanium and the blade is ceramic. I've made two of these. One is in my pocket and this one for you."

It was awkward...both men stood and faced each other. A final strong handshake and Dan left the office wiping tears from his eyes. As he re-traced his steps down the hallway to the Quarterdeck, he thought how could it be this hard? Seal Team Two was a tough crowd. Each of these elite warriors projected a swagger and an edge that they brought to everything. It just didn't end with the ops. They brought it with them every day, wore it like a badge of honor and too often paid dearly with failed marriages, alienated families and addictive behavior. Their only normalcy was the team, where each and every one acted as their brothers' keepers. In their usual environment, nothing else really mattered.

Dan saluted the Duty Officer and walked outside. The hot sun and high Tidewater humidity never felt better.

Chapter 7

Virginia Beach, VA
Veterans Day
November 11, 2017

Dan Steele couldn't imagine how anyone could be happier. He glanced at his wife from the driver's seat. Jill's short blonde hair swept over her high cheekbones. She pushed a few strands back into place and continued talking to the toe-headed twin boys in the back seat.

"Boys, get ready to go over the bridge and through the tunnel." She always sucked in a mouthful of air through her teeth to make it seem even scarier.

The jeep had just started heading north across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel, a 20 mile span on the "Follow the Gulls" route connecting Virginia's Eastern Shore with Virginia Beach. The Tidewater area was a Navy town with most of the ships in the Atlantic Fleet calling Norfolk home. Dan looked forward to see the flat Virginia coastline in his rear view mirror.

Hampton Boulevard, the main drag into the base used to be lined with locker clubs, tattoo parlors, strip joints and bars. The shore patrol couldn't keep up with the fights, thefts and mayhem. Sailors were poorly paid and treated like second class citizens. What had been built up to provide the care these young men needed mired them down in the mud. The home of the Atlantic Fleet, Norfolk was a town to avoid and was universally regarded as the right place to insert the enema tube if anyone seriously wanted to clean up the Navy. However, Norfolk shed its image of a sailor's town over the last thirty years.

After nearly six years of active duty, Dan and Jill had grown tired of the unpredictability of active duty life, particularly his frequent absence. The two had met in Newport, RI during his time as a trainee at the Officer Candidate School. Running in opposite directions on a narrow sidewalk, they passed each other in front of one of the storied mansions along Bellevue Avenue. Both of them stopped and couldn't really explain why, but it was if they had been searching for each other for years and finally met. The two stared at each other as they closed the thirty feet separating them. Dan first broke the silence.

"Do I know you?"

"No, I don't believe we've ever met, in this life or a previous one."

"This is very strange. Why did you stop?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

"Where are you on your run?"

"Just finishing, how 'bout you?"

"About halfway through but I am happy to skip the last three miles to find out who you are."

Outwardly a curious match, at 6'3" Dan's frame dwarfed Jill, petite at 5'3". He had dark hair and a strong jaw. With much softer more delicate features, Jill's blonde hair was short and kept in place by an aqua blue headband matching her eyes.

"Do you like coffee?" she asked.

"Sure."

"OK, let's jog down to Thames Street and solve this mystery."

"Pre-determined" is how Jill described it after the first day when they stayed in their shorts and running shoes, drinking coffee and getting to know each other. Inseparable, the two became good friends first and then fell in love. Both believed they were simply meant for each other.

Sixty days later, Dan graduated from OCS and left the following day for San Diego to attend Basic Underwater Demolition School (BUDS), a grueling prerequisite course for Seals with a 75-80% attrition rate. Dan felt a huge void when he and Jill began to separate. He tried unsuccessfully to sugar-coat the situation.

"I'll probably wash out and be sent home after the first week. Then we can get married and live a more conventional military life for the rest of my four year commitment. I'll get my teaching certificate, and we'll grow old together teaching right here in Newport."

Jill knew better. She didn't object too strenuously because his plans always included her.

"Sure. You are a natural leader and will probably be the top graduate in your class. Wash-out? I don't think so!"

A life-long Newporter, she grew up in old clapboard colonial down on the point, a quiet community separated from the downtown area previously frequented by unruly sailors serving on Atlantic Fleet cruisers and destroyers. Her father worked as a diesel mechanic in a local boatyard and just couldn't get enough of the fresh salt air. The family lived simply within spitting distance of Narragansett Bay. Jill studied hard, played soccer and became a star of the cross-country team despite her compact frame and short legs. She graduated with honors and headed to Brown University in Providence on a full scholarship, getting her undergraduate degree in biology with enough education credits to earn a teaching certificate which she leveraged into a job right back in Newport, teaching seventh graders the secrets of life. Jill could not understand her classmates' un-ending quest for romance in high school or college. Full of energy and head-turning attractive, she had a full life and loved living it and did not need to get tangled up with a man to complicate things. Living with her parents in Newport after college seemed practical to her.

Dan learned that Jill had a very good active mind and, more important, possessed lots of common sense. Within weeks of the run that changed both their lives, he realized that Jill's mental capacity exceeded his own and he should just be happy she was much smarter than he was. Dan grew comfortable with the realization and never needed to verbalize it specifically. He just wanted to spend all his time with her.

While Jill had complete confidence in Dan and his strength was something she welcomed in her life, Jill also had a strong foundation and the self-reliance of a New Englander. She had conviction and a black and white view of right and wrong. A wonderful mother, she lived for the two boys they'd brought into the world together, raising them with love and caring and setting an early knowledge of where their bounds were.

Dan's upbringing was starkly different. An only child whose parents had been killed in a tragic head-on collision with a strung-out trucker trying to stay awake on Route 81 in western Virginia, Dan had become self-reliant at an early age. His parents were spending all their time and energy on keeping a small market going with the prospects of a larger box store coming to nearby Roanoke that would eventually force them to close. They were generous people and could not stand to see anyone go hungry so the tray beneath the register cash drawer was stuffed with IOUs and cash register receipts which would never be paid. They were eking out a living but the family appreciated what they did have and it seemed the important things were always there. The trio was tight knit and loving.

He and his father always took a few days off during deer season in the fall and would fish together on one of the fast moving streams in the area in the spring and summer. His simple, uncomplicated life got very complicated in the fall of his senior year when his parents were killed. An exceptional student, his teachers encouraged him to apply to go on college. He knew

his only hope of attending college lay in an athletic scholarship. Dan led the football team and gained the attention of the Virginia Tech scouts in his junior year when the team went to the State Championships for the first time in twenty-two years.

The sale of the grocery store barely covered the property taxes. He moved in with his mother's sister and her family for the remainder of his senior year in high school and got recruited by Virginia Tech as a football player. He rode the bench for the first two games and realized the starting quarterback played at a level that would pave the way to the NFL. Dan convinced one of the coaches to have him lead the "special" teams for kick-offs, punts and goal line stands. His work complemented the powerhouse offense, and Virginia Tech reached the conference finals two years straight. There had not been a kick-off return or punt return for a touchdown for two seasons- a school record.

To keep in shape, he swam in the off-season and got invited to join the swim team on a scholarship after an impromptu free-style race when he beat the top swimmer by ten yards in a 100 yard race. He'd always been a strong swimmer and effortlessly adapted to competitive swimming, captaining the team for his junior and senior years. A Navy recruiter convinced him the Seals could use his talents. It turned out to be a very easy decision. And one that led him to Jill.

Dan began to resent the time he had to spend away from his family. He was always either on a mission or preparing for the next one. Special Ops had become the "go to" branch of the military in the nation's undeclared wars and fight against terrorism. He vowed to make up the lost time with Jill and his two laughing boys in the back seat. Smiling to himself, Dan knew in his heart it would never get any better than this. He did not know how wrong he was.

Chapter 8

Philadelphia, PA
Veterans Day
November 11, 2017

The Transportation Security Agency's new recruitment center opened its doors in the shadow of City Hall just two weeks prior to Veterans Day and had already met its first month's projections of offers to screened and qualified candidates despite the fact that more than fifty percent of the walk-ins failed to meet the minimum standards and were not moved to the next processing step. Another fifteen percent would wash-out of the training program. Compared to other US Government jobs, TSA standards were set low. Too low for most of the seasoned hands: recruiters joked that all you needed to do was fog a mirror and pass the urinalysis testing on your test day and you were in. Right downtown and with a nearby parking garage accepting TSA validations, the Center attracted a large number of potential applicants from the decaying and corrupt "City of Brotherly Love." There were few real job opportunities in the city and the applicant traffic was heavy. Four agents rotated from their normal airport duties and staffed the center. This was great duty: no airport hassles, no passenger complaints or investigations, per diem pay which allowed you to pocket some extra cash, and a standard work day with every Holidays and weekends off.

"Dave Gadsden?" asked the young man. A tall, muscular man with a shaved head topping a sparkling white TSA uniform with razor sharp military creases straightened behind the counter.

"Yes, that's me." He stood and extended his hand to the boy and smiled. "What can I do for you?" The big brass buckle was polished to a rich, deep shine that was clearly part of a daily routine.

The son of an itinerant farmer from Monck's Corner, South Carolina, Dave Gadsden starred as a left guard on offense and middle linebacker on defense for the High School making it all the way to the State play-offs. Big Dave went 110% on every play...football would be his ticket out of Monck's Corner. The small town's official description, "where life is a little slower, a little calmer, and a little bit sweeter", attracted many of his teammates and friends who would live out their entire lives struggling and then die, having never ventured outside South Carolina's low country. He hated the smell of the paper plant that permanently scented the air and made the stifling humidity even more unbearable.

His hopes ended violently near mid-field when a pulling guard from Summerville slammed into his right knee on a well-executed trap play. Dreams of continued gridiron glory were dashed in a heartbeat, though he did have the distinction of being the first member of his family to complete high school. Some consolation! He enlisted in the US Air Force soon after graduation.

Dave thrived in the service...he listened closely, appreciated the certainty of the routine, and loved the disciplined and predictable environment where there were rules for everything. He gravitated to flying and became a C-141 loadmaster, leading his team with the same drive that made him a star on the football field. His strength, stamina and focus coupled with his model military bearing supported a strong service reputation as a man people would listen to and follow. He gave the Air Force twenty years, rising to the rank of Master Sergeant. He thought joining the TSA would be more of the same. He was determined to become a standout there as well.

The recruiting center opened its glass doors on Market Street right on time and Big Dave clapped his hands loudly and raised the energy level with his booming voice "Another day to excel, people. Let's make it another great one! Let's go!"

The young man who asked for Dave Gadsden shook his hand enthusiastically.

"Good morning, Mr. Gadsden, I'm Jose Santos. Happy Veterans Day!"

Jose had been carefully selected. His tall athletic frame was a rich brown, a mixture of sperm from Puerto Rico and an egg carried from Guatemala. Manuel and Maria, his common-law wife of twenty-two years, lived with their family in a dilapidated tar-papered shack no bigger than a garden shed. Built long ago to house seasonal workers, the shack had been abandoned when mushroom farming became more profitable. The family accepted their current living conditions...there were no hopes or dreams of anything better in the small eastern Pennsylvania town they called home. Manuel worked the mushroom farms, spending most of his waking days in a dank humid atmosphere that came from the ground and the fetid mushroom compost which gave him headaches and caused fits of violent coughing that only subsided with cough medicine and clean air. He feared his constant wheezing would shorten his life, but there were no alternatives for someone who didn't have the papers to get another job. Many others found themselves in the same boat. He would continue working and make the best of it.

The Santos family was devastated when Jose was struck by a car just outside Kennett Square, the mushroom capital of the world. The driver didn't stop. Jose nearly died because the splintered bone in his shattered leg severed the femoral artery and only some quick thinking by an EMT saved his life. The doctor showed no emotion when he came out of surgery still wearing a sweat-soaked gown.

"Are you Jose's parents?" he asked. Maria gasped and fell to the tile floor when the doctor explained the clinical facts. There was too much internal damage and the crushed leg couldn't be saved. He'd done what he could with no heroics. The boy's family was not going to pay, and he knew he'd get called by the medical director to justify why he'd done so much. Only four years out of med school and already numbed by a profession where most physicians remained detached and aloof without any involvement or feeling...not enough time or energy for that.

A few days after his discharge, Manuel and Maria thought they'd won the lottery when a man appeared out of nowhere and offered not only to handle Jose's medical bills but also to provide a used Buick station wagon to the family. Six weeks after the accident, Jose's leg was fitted with a high-tech composite prosthesis in a private clinic. Jose couldn't believe his good luck in having some benefactor make all the arrangements and pay for his custom-fitted leg. He quickly learned to walk and felt very positive about his future. From time to time, Brian the benefactor called Jose on a cell phone he'd given him, asking about his leg and how he was doing, and how the station wagon was running. Later, he also asked him to do a couple of things around the city and even paid his cab fare. So Jose looked forward to visiting the TSA recruiting center and presenting David Gadsden with a distinctive wooden pen engraved with the US Air Force logo and words "Top Loadmaster."

Brian surprised Jose with a new cell phone just that morning and tested it with a call as the two of them sat in Brian's car, just before he entered the TSA Recruiting Center. Jose was thrilled. This was going to be a great day. Brian promised he would take him to the city's interactive science museum, the Franklin Institute, later in the morning.

Towering over the boy, Dave smiled broadly as he examined the new pen and excitedly exclaimed "Wow, Jose, this is just great. What a surprise!" He extended his hand again and asked, "By the way, how did you know I was a Loadmaster?"

The two were both smiling and still shaking hands when the composite shell of Jose's prosthetic leg disintegrated into thousands of razor-sharp shards followed closely by an ever expanding circle of steel pellets which surrounded the twelve pounds of C4 explosive that replaced Jose's flesh and bone.

Gadsden's torso fell to the floor, his shaved head landing between his polished black shoes. The white TSA uniform with its sharp military creases was torn from his body in the blast. The polished buckle lay several feet away, its shine covered with a bloody froth. The TSA banner hanging from the ceiling was shredded. The first responders estimated fifteen to twenty people dead, about a half dozen who might die before the day ended and perhaps ten others who would wear their injuries for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 9

Newport, Rhode Island
Veterans Day
November 11, 2017

Suzanne Murphy was the Chief Chemist at the Newport Water Department located just off Connell Highway opposite a strip mall. Newport boomed after the US Navy left the town in the 1970s and had become a haven for tourists attracted to the town's mix of traditional New England and yuppie-smart. Sure there was a Starbucks down on cobble-stoned Thames Street but there was also a marine hardware store where you could buy mooring line and bottom paint as well as the popular white-soled boat shoes. What bothered the locals were the tourists who jammed the narrow streets and started spreading out to the few good restaurants in town. Newport had a reputation for bad restaurants. Most of the waiters were hung-over drunks recruited that morning. But nothing could compete with the town's history and feel. The ocean made it different.

Bill Schmidt sat back in his swivel chair and relaxed. Everything was green on the gauge board in front of him, and he mentally started the list of necessities for tomorrow's trip out on the bay on his buddy's boat. He expected a good day of fishing. It was getting late in the season for Striped bass but the blues still chased the bait fish in the Bay and they could always do some bottom-fishing off Fort Adams. Weather was going to be perfect... chilly, 4-6 knots of wind out of the south and waves of less than one foot. He made a note to check the tide tables when he got home. Six more hours to go in his shift, and he'd be heading out the door. Bill pulled a magazine from the middle of the stack which filled the bottom desk drawer...the glossy pictures had nothing to do with game fish but reminded him of the huge collection of raunchy magazines from the Chiefs' Quarters of USS Spruance (DD-963) where he served as Chief Engineman.

The main gate light briefly flickered but it often did when the wind came off the Bay. Cuts in the maintenance and operations funding led to a number of problems recently, and the team started to cut corners. Suzanne had done a good job holding on to the people assigned to the Water Department. But with everything else being challenged by the budget, Bill knew the people were next to go. A bank of monitors showed an unbroken view of the perimeter fence and main gate. Bill returned to the magazine wondering if what he saw was the work of a plastic surgeon who had gotten a little heavy-handed with the silicone.

Schmidt was startled and nearly fell out of his chair when the control room door opened. He still had a shocked look on his face and a single red hole in his forehead when Dan Lewis came in to take over the next morning.

Sometime that night, a small tank truck backed up to the aeration beds. Two men uncoiled a rigid rubber hose and pulled it over to the first pool. One man opened the valve and let the tank empty quietly with gravity. Even in the darkness, the two men could see the cloudy liquid eagerly spread across the first bay. The bacteria would be carried through the miles of pipes connecting Aquidneck Island's water supply. After discharging their cargo, the two men left by the front gate and drove through Middletown into the night.

Chapter 10

Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel
Veterans Day
November 11, 2017

Traffic was light, and the Jeep was moving along effortlessly. Dan felt a real sense of freedom. The uncertainty of what lay ahead after this unstructured period of decompression shifted to the back of his mind. They were approaching the first of the two tunnels which mated with the bridges and provided a deep water channel for the US Navy and many commercial carriers transiting through Hampton Roads.

Initially opened in 1964, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel replaced the ferry service with a 20 mile combination of elevated roadways resting on thousands of concrete piles and two mile-long tunnels exiting on man-made islands. In 1999, a parallel southbound lane was completed. Water depth along the roadway varied from twenty-five to one hundred feet and the vertical clearance over the tunnels ranged from forty to eighty feet to accommodate the busy port of Hampton Roads that was also the US Navy's homeport of Norfolk, VA. Most of the Navy's aircraft carriers were stationed there, and those floating airfields needed more than fifty feet of water between the surface of the water and the bottom to keep their massive underwater hulls afloat.

He looked in the rear-view mirror and instructed the boys to *hold your breath* when they entered the tunnel. Each of the boys always tried to hold their breath longer than the other but usually it was Dan who ended the game when he burst out laughing at his sons.

He felt relaxed but his military training also kept him keenly aware of his surroundings. There was a truck in front of them and a minivan behind them as he pressed lightly on the gas pedal and signaled to pass the truck. He glanced over his shoulder as an added precaution. He was just pulling even with the truck when he felt the road tremble under the car. At the same time, he saw a geyser of water shoot from the right side of the tunnel, tumbling the small sedan in front of the truck as if it were a Styrofoam cup. Dan slammed on the brakes at the same time the Jeep was engulfed by a wall of water that swept it around like an out of control water ride at Busch Gardens, scraping its roof on the top of the tunnel before rolling upside down and settling to the bottom as it filled with muddy seawater.

He unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for Jill. He pulled her from the passenger seat into a narrow pocket of air at the floorboard of the overturned car. Limp and unresponsive, she had a thready pulse but no other sign of life. Her open mouth signaled that she'd been knocked unconscious by force of the water slamming the Jeep upward and sideways. The boys remained underwater, their lifeless bodies still buckled into their car seats and hanging upside down. The impact of the water and rollover forced the air from their little lungs and replaced it with dirty seawater. He knew of children who survived after minutes of being submerged in water but there was no hope of that outcome today.

For a moment, Dan thought it would be better to die with his family that day but then his survival instinct kicked into overdrive. Hundreds of feet of wreckage separated the Steele family from their next breath. What a situation. Out of the Navy, having survived two wars and multiple special operations, took the uniform off yesterday only to lose his family and to die at the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay in a tunnel today?

In the seconds it took the Jeep to fill with water as it was being thrown to the left by the torrent of water, Dan was holding his breath, his mind sorting through the options. He knew the Jeep was upside down on the bottom or atop some other poor souls that would also die today. After forcing a couple of deep breaths into Jill's lungs without any response, he kissed her and let go of her limp body. He took a long final breath before the water pressed the sliver of air out of the Jeep.

"Orient" Dan disciplined himself. How long had it been? What are the facts? OK. Bottom of the bay trapped in a car one hundred feet from the surface. How far were they into the tunnel? What was the lateral distance between the car and the tunnel point of failure? Unable to see and maybe a minute to go before he'd gulp some dirty seawater and drown with his family. At this stage, he thought again about taking the easy way, resigning himself to that fate or resisting the drowning death Seals fear most. Head-pounding, mind focused and in automatic, Dan remembered the emergency "Spare Air" tank in his bag in the back of the car. Awful choice. He climbed over the second seat where he hoped his two young sons' deaths came without the panic that comes with conscious drowning. He touched each of their faces. Could he make it out with Jill and the boys? A simple no. Blind, Dan tore himself from the second seat and desperately pulled himself along the roof line, found his duffel bag and felt along the seams until he found the zipper and opened the bag's mouth. He was conscious of his motions getting slower and at the same time feeling the intense urge to open his mouth and take a fatal breath of water. There had been no time for hyperventilation. Lungs now burning with a familiar feeling he knew all too well and with no visibility, he questioned his decision again as he pawed through the bag looking for the bottle that might save his life.

Known as "Gills" to his fellow Seals, Dan had the ability to ration the air in his lungs like no other Seal could. Mental concentration had more to do with it than lung capacity.

Chapter 11

Fresno, California
Veterans Day
November 11, 2017

The Mayor of Fresno, Laura Sanders, had just finished presiding over the 10:30 a.m. opening ceremony to begin the west coast's largest Veterans Day Parade. Begun in 1919 to honor returning World War I veterans, the city's Armistice Day parade preceded the formal declaration of a National Holiday in 1954. This year, over 10,000 people were expected to participate in the parade that included marching bands from around the country as well as floats and a large number of active duty military personnel. Laura was seated in the center of the VIP bleachers in front of City Hall flanked by the Lieutenant Governor and the Commanding General of the California National Guard. State Senators and Representatives as well as town officials jockeyed for positions closer to the Mayor where they all knew the cameras would be focused. This year, TV and print media commitments had risen dramatically. The forecast called for a sunny 70° with clear skies for the parade start at 11:15 a.m.

In addition to opening the parade, her public affairs team had orchestrated a number of other opportunities for her to take the podium. It would be a momentous day for the city and especially for Laura who was the odds-on favorite to win the next governor's race. She was being groomed for the position. Twice that year she'd been invited to Washington to explore her political future with the Democratic National Committee.

Thirty miles east of Fresno at the edge of the Sierra National Forest, two helicopters had taken off during the Mayor's opening speech and flew west at a low altitude. No flight plan had been filed, and the helicopters were not part of the parade festivities.

Downtown was thronged with thousands of sightseers lining the parade route closed off earlier that morning by the Fresno police department. As they'd done since 9/11, the police department had inspected all the floats and vehicles that would take part in the parade and had screened all the bands and military units. Every year, the police chief complained about the parade's impact on his budget and questioned the rising cost of the additional security, but the Mayor's office insisted that public safety was first and foremost. A first responders' command post was established at the mid-point of the route. The morning briefing by the local FBI agent revealed no unusual activity or particular threat. Everyone felt confident that the only challenges would be the usual lost child or maybe a couple of veterans drinking in public. Fresno was ready!

The longstanding commemoration of the day began as a lone bugler started playing a mournful version of "Taps" at 11:11 a.m. to mark the ending of the 'War to End All Wars' in the 11th Month, 11th Day, and 11th hour. At the same time the two helicopters were seen flying low up the main street towards the reviewing stand. The two helicopters were identified by the general seated next to Laura.

He leaned towards the mayor pointing with the scrambled eggs that covered the bill of his uniform hat, "Those are special forces helos. I flew one in Iraq." Laura tried not to pay attention to the general, annoyed that he would start a conversation during what was supposed to be the most solemn moment of the day.

The pair seemed harmless enough, soundlessly keeping their distance and hovering short of the reviewing stand. Darkly tinted egg-shaped glass wrapped and protected their cockpits. As if

on cue, the bugler's last note seemed to invite the craft forward where they hovered on either side of the reviewing stand as if ready to take their place among the bands and floats getting into final position a few blocks away.

Laura's questioning look to the uniform on her left turned to shock as the fuselage doors of both aircraft opened to reveal ugly black metal snouts. Heavy caliber incendiary rounds began pouring out of twin barrels to the left and right. The bleachers were methodically raked by the cannon fire so that the red, white and blue bunting seemed to outline an area that had been colored in with bright red. The same happened on the other side of the street where the cannons cut down the media stands. After ten seconds, the two helicopters separated, one flying slowly down the main street spitting fire into the crowds that were attempting to flee and the other flying back the parade route and using both a forward cannon as well as the side cannons to savage the marching bands, floats and military units that were all assembled to commemorate the end of a war. This looked like the beginning of another one. It was a bloodbath of the cruelest type. Everyone was a target that day.

With their mission apparently complete, the two helicopters took positions at either end of Main Street and then flew towards each other. Witnesses claimed later that the two helicopters were flying twenty feet above the pavement when they collided in front of the reviewing stand in a brilliant flash of magnesium and unspent fuel, the rotor blades snapping off and becoming scythes that cut everything in their paths. Laura Sanders' political aspirations were unexpectedly thwarted that day because she and everyone else in the reviewing stand that morning were dead.

To the east, a team silently collapsed the portable antennas that provided a radio link to the two helicopters and stowed them in plain white utility vans. Two of the men controlled the event using what appeared to be ordinary gaming consoles. The third had viewed the carnage on a split screen monitor via a live video feed from each of the remotely controlled drones. It had been executed flawlessly, and the casualties were horrific. The trio fanned out over the small area, crisscrossing their temporary operating base to ensure there was nothing left behind.

With the equipment loaded, the leader gave the signal, and the three vehicles sped off in different directions. The operation was perfectly executed, and the team had followed the timeline precisely. What two of the drivers didn't know is that another timer had already been activated that would trigger a powerful blast in thirty minutes in each of their vans. There would be little left when the police arrived at the two separate sites forty miles apart. The third van was abandoned in a nearby town where another car had been parked awaiting its arrival. The driver tapped a brief message into a small pager and looked forward to a few cold beers somewhere down the road.

Chapter 12

Chesapeake Bridge Tunnel

Depth: Sixty feet

November 11, 2017

Dan found the ‘spare air’ bottle in his bag. The small cylinder about the size of a water bottle had been presented to him during the Seal Team Two’s farewell roast the night before. He insisted on including wives and girlfriends at the event and hoped that this departure from previous formats would keep the night a bit more civilized. He grasped the first model of a self-contained rescue device that contained less than two cubic feet of compressed air, the equivalent of thirty breaths relaxing at your picnic table. Here, blind and trapped under the bay, Dan’s breathing rate increased with the panic he felt. He calculated his odds at 10,000 to 1. As he turned the small valve on top of the tank, Dan wondered whether it had been used or had any air in it at all. He put the mouthpiece in his mouth and drew in a full breath of old, metallic-tasting air.

He found a child’s ‘Sea Hunt’ style mask that had been another gift from the evening and pulled it over his head. The mask skirt was brittle and leaked but it was better than swimming blind with nothing to protect his eyes. He pulled himself over the back seat, crawled along the roof and after saying a silent, painful goodbye to Jill and the boys, exited the jeep through the driver’s side door, blindly feeling his way ahead...but to where? Maybe he was just postponing the inevitable or making a difficult problem worse for the recovery effort that would be underway in the next week.

The entire team came to Dan’s send-off, and he’d been given the spare air bottle and mask by Tom Bryant as one of the many joke gifts. Dan and Tom had reported to the Seal Team within a couple of weeks of each other. They’d become good friends ever since the stupid challenge that had been spawned after they’d completed a training operation from a wet submersible Seal Delivery System that had been developed to insert six Seals to the objective area from a ship or submarine operating ten to fifteen miles off-shore. On the trip to the beach, the two had argued about the length of USS Wisconsin (BB-64) that was saved from being scrapped by joining Missouri, New Jersey, and Iowa as floating museums. The Iowa class battleship had become a popular attraction on the Norfolk waterfront and was berthed right downtown at Waterside. The argument ended with Tom betting Dan that he could swim the length of the ship underwater. Dan quickly took the bet and thought nothing of it until two months later.

“Hey, Dan,” boomed Tom’s voice in the conference room after the usual Wednesday meeting. “The ship is 884’ long...you still want to swim or do you want to just hand me the win without getting wet?”

Dan’s mind flashed back to the long, cold ride to the beach. Without a thought he said, “You’re on.”

That night Dan told Jill about the bet. She was not happy.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You are supposed to be an adult. We’ve got two boys who want to be just like their dad and you come up with this stupid manhood challenge. I can’t believe it.”

When they were first married, Dan would sputter and try to defend his actions but soon learned that Jill would not buy it, and her sweet disposition could turn cold as ice. He found that

his only viable strategy was to let her vent long and loudly without trying to explain himself. Over time, he'd worked hard to limit the number of times he'd engaged in what she so correctly called s squared or Seal Stupidity.

Since this kind of wager would never be sanctioned by the Seal Team's leadership or the Norfolk police, it would take place at night. Dan and Tom donned their masks and fins and jumped into the harbor with several team members watching from the deserted pier. After a few minutes of hyperventilating and agreeing that this was their last stupid wager, the two submerged and swam past the massive bronze propellers swimming about six feet apart on either side of the keel. Tom was kicking strongly and pulled ahead a few feet. Dan could barely see the glow of his underwater light through the turbid water. He wondered how close to the bottom they were swimming.

Suddenly Dan pulled even with Tom and swam right by him. Something was wrong. His first thought was shallow water blackout as he swam quickly to Tom's side. Dan grabbed his arm and there was no reaction. He shined his light into his face. His mask was gone and blood gushed from the middle of his forehead. Dan grabbed the back of his wetsuit and started to drag him along the curve of the hull to the surface. Dan cursed to himself: no buoyancy compensator to speed this trip to the surface, no idea of where he was along the hull and no knowledge of what might be alongside the ship's hull on the surface to make this a longer swim. Oh yeah, most important, his lungs were ready to explode, and he was feeling a bit of panic.

Before they reached the surface, Tom regained consciousness and swallowed several gulps of water. When Dan reached the surface, Tom was discovering the new seam in his skull and wondering what happened. Within seconds, the two were surrounded by other team members who got them out of the water and onto a boat pontoon.

The sun was just coming up when Dan, Tom and several of the team left the hospital and headed back to the base. Commander Hank Owens had paid a visit to the two, muttering about the reports and the questions he'd get on this one once it was splashed all over the front page of the Virginian-Pilot. He'd ordered an immediate "Safety Stand-down" for the entire team as a damage control measure. Dan knew that the skipper's "Safety Stand-down" would be far less painful than the one that Jill would impose when he got home.

Chapter 13

Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel

Depth: Sixty feet

November 11, 2017

Cold and dark. He visualized the explosion and developed a mental picture of the situation. It was grim. “*Orient*” he commanded himself. He had about three to four minutes to get to the surface, and believed that he was breathing like an asthmatic suffering from an acute attack. There were three exits. One long one continuing through the tunnel; another long one that would head back the way they came or one up through what he thought was a breach in the tunnel wall. Options one and two were non-starters. The only way out was through what had to be a large fracture in the tunnel wall. He moved out of the car along the tunnel wall, feeling for something that might give him some idea of direction. Within thirty seconds he found what he believed was the FEDEX truck that he remembered being ahead of his car in the slower lane when he felt the tremor and just before the car was engulfed. He reasoned that he was heading through the tunnel and that the rupture would be to his right. He kicked slowly on a route that he believed would lead across the tunnel’s width and somewhere close to the breach. He reached the tunnel wall and began swimming along it. *Was he swimming in the right direction?* After what seemed like a minute, he felt a swirl in the water as he touched a series of heavy steel reinforcing bars pointed inwards like punji sticks. What else might block his way to the surface? He figured he had another eighty to ninety feet to go before he could pull in some fresh air. He thought about Jill and wondered whether to spit-out the mouthpiece and join his family in their dirty water graves. Training prevailed. He would try to pick his way through what was likely a rebar jungle.

Trying hard not to panic, he’d tried to feel his way through the twisted re-bar. Every second counted now. He shivered...the water temperature felt colder, and he knew that he was losing body heat. He pulled himself along the twisted re-bar hand-over-hand searching for a way out. Repeatedly, he moved forward only to find a structural box canyon of twisted metal and concrete blocking his escape.

Just as he started probing another pathway to what he thought was the outer shell of the tunnel, the spare air bottle clanked against a protruding metal spur pulling the rubber mouthpiece out of his clenched teeth. Desperate, Dan flailed frantically to catch the bottle as it fell into the muddy darkness. No luck. He was out of options. He pulled himself forward scraping his torso and shins trying to find an escape route. Arms feeling the way ahead, he squeezed his body through the tangled reinforcement rods towards what he hoped was open water. The idea of filling his lungs with seawater and drowning in a rebar cage petrified him. He pushed off a loose piece of concrete and pressed forward. Home free? Just another fifty to sixty feet to go to the surface.

Dan kicked hard towards the muted light that penetrated the turbid water. His lungs were burning, and he instinctively took a sip of seawater that caused him to cough, exhausting the spent air in his lungs. He was drowning. How much further? The light brightened as he finally neared the surface and finally gulped a life-restoring lungful of warm, salty air that tasted like diesel fuel. He didn’t care what it tasted like or how dirty it was...it was air and that’s what he needed. With his mind still racing, he forced himself to orient. He quickly focused and panned the horizon around him, spotting the red hull-stripe of a USCG boat bobbing a few hundred

yards away. He started a slow breast-stroke towards the boat, keeping his head above water and enjoying the sensation of the oily air filling his lungs. Thinking about what he left on the bottom made him wonder what could happen next. Exhaling forcefully, he vowed to find out what happened and why.

Chapter 14

DHS- Domestic Terrorism Annex
Washington, DC
November 12, 2017

Deep inside a large gray building located on 10th Street Northwest, the DHS Domestic Terrorism Annex was surrounded by museums, galleries, association offices, lobbyists and law firms just a few blocks from the Gallery Place/ Chinatown Metro stop. Admiral James Wright sat at the end of a V-shaped conference table and listened to the initial assessment. His mind wandered as he heard the same old conservative, tentative briefing that provided little new information as to what really happened. These were good people that had been drained of their ability to look at things objectively. Classic bureaucrats, they thought they'd seen it all. This was merely another random collection of some isolated events that would see the front pages for maybe another 48 hours and then be forgotten.

He looked down the table and watched the presentation on the screen. It occurred to him that the person who had chosen the conference table had made a good choice. From his seat at the head of the table, he could see the slides and keep an eye on all the other subtle interactions going on at the table.

“Any questions, Admiral?”

“No. Thank you all.” The Admiral sat back in his chair and then pushed forward, putting both his elbows on the table.

The dozen people at the table suddenly were all leaning forward and waiting for the Admiral to speak. One of them was a retired Navy Captain who knew what was coming. He looked at the single row of ribbons centered on the Admiral's left breast uniform pocket just below a set of gold Navy wings. A glance captured a career: Defense Superior Service Medal, Navy Cross and Bronze Star with Combat “V.” There were many others, but Wright was an uncomplicated man who shunned the spotlight, avoided the Washington party circuit and didn't have a young, trophy wife. That was all part of the package required to be successful in this town. Wright was a rare, clear-thinking warfighter who firmly believed that everything he did had to somehow be tied to the men and woman on the front lines. If it didn't meet that criterion, then it was of little interest to him.

Sure, he'd been selected and promoted to Rear Admiral but not because of his efforts to impress his chain of command. He'd made it on the front lines, leading aircraft to their targets and being a man that people would follow anywhere, anytime. He was an Old Testament kind of guy who could crack the whip and wash the feet of his squadron or wing at the same time. That's why people naturally looked to him when a problem was messy and complicated. But it was painfully clear that he'd go no further. When the stream of dirty jobs that he'd willingly taken on for his service and for the country slowed, if it ever would, he'd be plucked by the Navy for retirement and replaced with one of those hard chargers on the fast track to more stars.

The President himself had picked Wright out of his J3 position on the Joint Staff and asked him to pull back his request for retirement. Wright was assigned to lead the new domestic terror cell at DHS. He had been looking ahead towards retirement when he and Carole could return to Rhode Island. Construction of their retirement house on the Sakonnet River was already started when he was ordered to the job. He had made the Navy his top priority for all of thirty years and

was ready to see the next generation take over. It wasn't because he'd lost his motivation or that time had dulled his insight. No, the explanation was simple. He was ready to settle down, to dig a few clams for some chowder or match his wits against the striped bass that populated Narragansett Bay every summer. He longed for the simple pleasure of shuffling along the rocky beach with Carole deeply inhaling that clean, salt-laden air. Again, that would have to wait.

Jim had told Carole, "Heh, I've been serving at the pleasure of the President since commissioning so I can't say no!" She was disappointed but saw his eyes sparkle at taking on one final challenge. She was also worried: chaos seemed to follow him whatever the assignment. She enjoyed Washington and could certainly keep busy while he worked those long days and sometimes nights at DHS. It didn't matter what time he finished, he'd always come home and she looked forward to that each and every day. At least this job didn't involve leading a battle group halfway around the world for months at a time. He was driving a large desk, not an aircraft carrier with 100 planes and a dozen warships in company.

"Were there any surveillance tapes from Philadelphia?" the Admiral asked.

"No, sir, TSA set up this recruiting office only a few weeks ago and leased the site for six months. A surveillance system was never requested or installed."

The Admiral removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"So, let's recap," he said, "We've got parade in Fresno with hundreds of dead spectators and vets alike, including the Lieutenant Governor of California, the Mayor and the Commanding General of the National Guard. A major highway tunnel flooded and who knows how many dead in Virginia Beach, seventeen people confirmed dead, another dozen wounded in Philly and the only thing we know is that a teenager was talking to the TSA chief when some sort of explosive went off. And we've got a water supply in Newport that's full of very virulent bacteria that's got the city panicked and people flooding the emergency rooms thinking that they have somehow contracted the plague from their drinking faucets. All on Veterans Day. Just a coincidence? Are there any dots to be connected here?" The Admiral noticed that most of the people at the table began looking down and studying their planners. He did not expect an answer anyway.

"Look, our Secretary sees the President this afternoon and asked me to come along to provide an initial assessment. There's not a lot of detail here and nothing conclusive on any of these incidents. I guess it will be a short meeting." He stood at the table, looked down both sides and concluded, "I sure hope these things are not connected but my gut tells me that that is just wishful thinking."

He walked back to his office and stopped briefly at his administrative assistant's desk.

"Michelle, I need to be over in the Secretary's office at 1:00 p.m."

Michelle would have Wright's driver pick him up at the building's back entrance and drive him up to the Nebraska Avenue site that DHS had taken over from the US Navy. The site was small and not ideally located for a Cabinet Secretary whose time was spent equally between the White House and Capitol Hill, but USG facilities were at a premium with the government's infrastructure continuing to expand like an incoming tide that never receded. Having to squeeze into a consolidated facility to house most of the Department's operations seemed to be the inevitable compromise. Spreading the organization across the expanse of the General Services Administration's DC office complexes would be too complicated, and the Director would lose control of his expanding workforce. Better to slum a few years on Nebraska Avenue until a larger Headquarters could be built, leased or re-purposed.

Chapter 15

Double Eagle Headquarters
M Street Georgetown
Washington, DC
November 12, 2017

The dark black car with tinted windows glided into an underground parking lot a block from the lazy Potomac. A former warehouse had been gutted top to bottom and extensively renovated to serve as the secretive Washington-based Headquarters of Double Eagle Industries. The Double Eagle building façade blended well with the traditional boutique offices that lined Georgetown's M Street. Whether old money or new, those building fronts reflected an abundance of it. Behind those doors, deals were brokered by some of the most powerful men in Washington. Though many lobbyists and think tanks still called K street home, Georgetown had become synonymous with influence peddling and Washington politics. Though not readily apparent, what was unique about the Double Eagle building was its size. The façade ended some sixty feet from the sidewalk and the building extended for another 100', ending just short of the old Chesapeake and Ohio canal.

The building renovation ended at the point that would be appropriate for most offices and the latter two-thirds of the building were nondescript, with few windows and none of the stately glitz. Some of the extra space on the M street fronted buildings had been converted to loft apartments or condos that could be accessed from the side or rear of the building and offered a proximity that attracted well-heeled commuters tired of spending hours on the road each day.

The driver stopped, got out of the car and made a sweep of the empty garage. There were three cars present. He then strode around the car and opened the rear door. The butt of a machine pistol was exposed beneath his jacket.

"All clear, Mr. Spence."

The tall beefy man moved quickly from the back seat, walked a dozen steps to the adjacent elevator and pressed his index finger against a biometric pad. The door opened and closed behind him. Though the Double Eagle building extended five floors above street level, this elevator stopped only in the garage and on the top floor.

"Good morning, Mr. Spence." The voice came from behind a massive mahogany desk guarded by a professionally attired woman who served as his Executive Secretary with an annual salary that had grown to \$250,000 dollars in the twelve years since she had started working on the top floor.

He nodded and walked through the open door to his office. Even with all the security, Spence was always on guard, vigilant to the smallest variations in patterns, whether physical or emotional. He could detect change of any sort and had developed a very sensitive coup d'oeil.

Born in the sleepy town of Durres on the western coast of Albania, he'd had an unremarkable childhood, an only child produced by a loving mother and a cold and suspicious father who regularly beat her and the child as well. The family eked out a living with his father, Agim, working at a local garage that specialized in providing new identities for the steady stream of stolen luxury cars flowing in from Europe. Anna cleaned the houses of several families that could afford domestic help.

He spent his childhood like all the children, sometimes fishing off the docks with a hand line, running around the Roman amphitheater in the center of town or hiding out in one of the concrete bunkers that still dotted the street corners and countryside. By the late 1990s, Albania had overcome its national paranoia and was trying to re-define itself after years of corruption. But another crisis overwhelmed the country. In the aftermath of Enver Hoxha's dictatorship, a new optimism had swept over the country, and money had poured into the economy with the prospects of incredible returns. Everybody was bought in to what amounted to a national-level Ponzi scheme of staggering proportion. When the bubble burst, the citizens took to the streets and drove out the new government with several thousand deaths attributed to the chaos of massive, country-wide uprisings. Finally, the UN mustered the courage to recognize the problem and restore some semblance of order. Beneath the surface, men talked of the future and how this would never happen to their country again.