
PRIMAL DECEPTION

A Lacy Merrick Thriller

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Published by HARP House Publishing
October, 2016 (1st edition)

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Cover design: LLPix Photography, www.llpix.com Laura Wright LaRoche
Editor: Hercules Editing and Consulting Services www.bzhercules.com

CHAPTER 1

The green wire was fastened into place with a tweezers-like instrument and the final step was now complete. The man with aged brown eyes set wide from his prominent nose removed his glasses and pulled upright in his chair. He returned the instrument to his desk and pushed away the rotating arm of the magnifier, switching off its light. With his hands pressed against his thighs, he inspected his handiwork before closing the briefcase in which the device was housed. He fully exhaled. The job was done.

Footfalls approached from beyond the back office where he worked. The time had come to deliver on his promise and for them to deliver on theirs.

“Is it ready?” In the doorway stood a younger man, short and slender with thick black hair and eyes that were shadowed by a heavy brow. He appeared indifferent as to the reason for his arrival. “If it isn’t, then...”

Before he could finish, the older man, who went by the name Ferran Basara, began to speak. “It is ready, as I promised your superior.” Ferran raised the briefcase from his desk. “Now you must keep your end of the bargain.”

“Your family’s safety will depend upon the successful deployment of your device. Then and only then will you know peace, my friend.”

Ferran shed his gaze from the man. “I doubt that it will bring me peace. Please—you must go now, before you draw unwanted attention.”

“Of course.” The man turned and proceeded to exit the shop where Ferran’s daughter remained standing behind the front counter. Her eyes followed him, but he didn’t give her a second look and pushed his way through the door.

At his departure, Izzah, Izzy to her friends, walked toward her father. Her petite frame stood firm inside the opened door. “Who was that?” She placed her hands on her hips.

Ferran looked at her and smiled, the creases on his face deepening as their eyes met. “No one you should be concerned with, Izzah.” He glanced at his watch. “Shouldn’t you be heading home soon?”

Izzah regarded her father with uncertainty. “In a little while. I need to finish taking inventory.” She remained with her eyes fixed on his.

He felt them burn into him but could say no more of his visitor. “Okay, then. I’ll be out in a moment.”

The late afternoon sun glared down on Imad Mufid as he made his way to his car, swinging the briefcase and disregarding its fragile contents. With a press of a button, his car, which was parked alongside the curb that fronted Ferran’s shop, unlocked. He stepped inside and set the case down on the passenger seat. He made the call. “I have the device.” Imad scanned the street ahead, noticing the passersby glance through his windshield. “Yes, sir. It will be taken care of soon. I’ll make the arrangements.” He pushed the key into the ignition. “Thank you, sir. I’ll let you know when it’s done.”

The car's engine purred to life and he pulled the gearshift of his small but newer model BMW into drive. Imad Mufid still had several tasks to complete before his job was done and the day was not nearly over for him.

“So this guy has the nerve to complain about our fees.” Owen Ballard reached for the bottle of merlot and topped off his glass. “And yet he suffered twice that in financial losses because he didn't see a need to upgrade his software and got hacked because of it.” He gazed around the table at his wife and friends who were hosting their dinner. “How much proof do you need to know that signing with our firm was the right thing to do?”

Jay Merrick raised his glass, “I hear you, my friend. It's a tough sell, but that's why we get twenty percent.” His merlot-stained lips parted into a smile. “I mean, take Lacy for example.”

Lacy Merrick turned to her husband as if caught off guard by the mention of her name.

“She's tasked with analyzing online chatter, data breaches, social media posts, and red-flagged language. And yet for helping to protect our country, she's paid only slightly more than our programmers.” He glanced to Owen. “We might have a tough sell, but we're paid handsomely for it while she works to protect our country and isn't paid shit.”

Lacy didn't appreciate the topic of conversation. Her job was generally off limits to discussion, especially in front of guests, but Jay was on his third glass of wine and what was that saying about loose lips and sinking ships?

“You should come back to work for us, Lacy.” Owen turned his glossy eyes in her direction. “We need someone to knock your husband from his perch as top salesman.”

Owen Ballard had a way of making Lacy uncomfortable just by the way he looked at her and this time was no different. She knew him well and couldn't understand what it was Jay saw in him. Though she would never admit it, Owen was part of the reason she left the firm. “No amount of money in the world would get me back there to work with the likes of you two again. Am I right, Jules?”

Julianne Ballard, second wife to Owen, was the youngest of the four people sitting at the table. Here was a woman who never worked in her life and whose only job was to look good on her husband's arm. And that was the way Owen preferred it.

Lacy missed Owen's ex. They had all been very close, including their children. She hadn't blamed Melissa for divorcing him. And in the two years since she'd known Julianne, she'd seen Owen become even more of a narcissist than he was before. It was no surprise to her that the topic of conversation Owen had instigated revolved around income, in general terms, of course. He wasn't so brash as to speak outright about the kind of money he pulled in. She didn't need to know because Jay pulled in the same kind, probably a little more, which made Owen jealous. It was written on his face, even now.

“Absolutely.” Julianne flashed her bright-white smile, which was in stark contrast to her bronzed skin and brassy blonde hair. She could have easily been cast in *The Real Housewives of Annandale, Virginia*, if there was such a thing. “Owen doesn't need any more competition from the Merricks.”

The three erupted in laughter and it seemed Owen hadn't caught on to the joke.

“I'm just teasing.” Julianne reached for his arm but released it immediately as he cast a scathing glance in her direction.

“Well, I couldn't eat another bite,” Lacy, noticing the exchange, began. “Why don't we finish our drinks in the living room?” She nodded to Jay for affirmation.

“Sounds like a great idea.” Jay reached for Lacy’s hand to help her from her chair. He leaned in as though he was about to kiss her cheek but began whispering in her ear. “Dodged a bullet there, didn’t we?”

She raised her eyebrows and stretched her lips into a wide smile. “Let’s just wrap this up. I think I’ve had about enough of the Ballards for one night.”

Owen pushed his chair from the table. “You’ll excuse me while I make a pit stop?”

“Certainly.” Jay nodded and continued into the living room. “Julianne?”

Owen turned left through the arched opening of the formal dining room and walked along the travertine floor in his Ferragamos, which clicked with each step. He stopped midway and turned back. The others had disappeared from view.

He’d been to this house many times before and was well acquainted with its layout. Jay’s study was ahead and to the right, at the end of the corridor, and that was where he would make a quick diversion. Another glance over his shoulder and still no one came into view. The Merrick children were already upstairs asleep in their rooms and their live-in housekeeper was cleaning up in the kitchen. Owen had but a few minutes before someone might question his whereabouts.

The study doors were closed, but unlocked, and Owen pushed them open with care. An espresso-colored desk with modern design appeared first as it was placed near the rear wall, fronting the built-in shelving units adorned with books and knick-knacks. He approached the desk and noted Jay’s laptop resting on the center. He didn’t consider opening it because it was most certainly password protected and this was an exploratory mission in any case.

Jay’s schedule was what he needed and had hoped to find an organizer or journal, but on further examination, it seemed that information would remain elusive. He would need to turn to something more surreptitious in order to uncover what he needed to know.

“Mr. Ballard?” Celeste stopped as she glimpsed inside Jay’s study and noticed Owen. “Did you need something?”

Owen, startled by her arrival, quickly stepped away from the desk. “Oh, no, thank you, Celeste. I was just looking for a business card Jay mentioned he had.” He began to walk toward her. “I’ll have to have him come and find it for me.”

Celeste, the Merricks’ housekeeper-slash-nanny, eyed Owen as he brushed past her.

“There you are!” Julianne patted the sofa. “Come join us, sweetheart. I was beginning to worry about you.”

Profoundly suspicious, which was perhaps why Lacy was good at her job, she studied Owen as he returned to the party. “Me too. Thought maybe you got lost.”

His eyes averted her stare as he answered his wife’s invitation to rejoin the group.

The evening had become prolonged and Lacy realized it would be up to her to call it. A glance at the wall-mounted clock above the fireplace and she raised her arms in a stretch. “We should probably call it a night. Got to get the kids up for school and get into the office early tomorrow.”

“Right. I suppose it is getting late.” Jay submitted to his wife’s unspoken request and rose from the side chair. “Thank you both for coming over tonight. It was a real pleasure.”

Owen stood and reached for Jay’s hand. “Thank you for hosting. It’s my turn next.” He turned to Lacy. “Thank you for a lovely evening and be sure to give Celeste our regards. She’s an amazing cook.”

His flesh-crawling look was again hurled in her direction. “I will, Owen. Thank you both for coming.”

Julianne soon followed and the Merricks showed their guests to the door.

“See you tomorrow, buddy.” Jay stood with the door open, letting in the still-cool evening breeze that was growing warmer with each passing day.

Owen leaned in to Lacy and pressed his lips gently against her cheek. “Good night, Lacy. See you soon.”

Jay reciprocated the gesture with Julianne, but Lacy didn’t feel the least bit threatened. His was distant and friendly, but she wondered if he noticed the way Owen looked at her and the way he placed his hand on the small of her back as he went in for the goodnight peck on the cheek.

When the guests finally stepped outside, the Merricks waved them off as they sped away in Owen’s Mercedes, top of the line model, of course.

Jay closed the door. “Well, that was fun.”

“Sure.” Lacy patted him on the shoulder and slogged her way toward the stairs.

“Oh come on, it was fun. You looked like you were having a good time.” Jay caught up to her at the bottom step. “I know Owen’s kind of an ass, but he’s all right. You only see him when he’s on, so to speak. He isn’t always that way.”

“If you say so.” Lacy kicked off her high-heels and held them with the crook of her fingers. “I haven’t worked with him in a while, so maybe I don’t remember that part. What was the deal with talking about my job anyway? You know that bothers me.”

“Ah hell, hon. I’m sorry. I guess it just slipped out.” Jay placed his hand around her waist. “Let me make it up to you?”

“Slipped, eh? You sure it wasn’t the three glasses of wine you had?” She was playing with him now but didn’t want to take it too far, as she was known to do. “Come on, then, you owe me—I guess.”

Lacy arrived at her desk and wasted no time getting to work. With headset on, she began studying the scrolling contents on the multiple monitors that curved around in front of her. A civilian data analyst at FBI headquarters in Washington, Lacy was among the elite men and women who were highly trained in matters of cyber security and data interpretation. Her interest in the field and an exceptional skillset led her to make the move from her former position with a high-tech cyber security firm to the FBI. Her husband, Jay, still worked at that firm.

“You ready to get started?” Michelle Vogel was the department head and now stood beside Lacy, peering down at her.

“Yes. I just need to pull the reports off the printer.”

“Great. I’ll see you in the conference room shortly.” Michelle’s tone was often mistaken as harsh, but this was a woman who’d fought for and won a position previously dominated by men. There was little room for niceties in this line of work.

Lacy retrieved the reports and followed a few of her colleagues into the conference room. The weekly meeting was about to begin.

“Okay.” Michelle leaned back in her chair and cocked her head. “Who wants to go first?”

A few glances were exchanged around the table before a man by the name of Brian Eckhart began to speak.

“I was asked to provide information to the Criminal Division regarding a few potential assets currently being handled by Counterintelligence.” His round cheeks puffed as he spoke. “I coordinated those efforts and provided them the necessary information. You’ll find the summary in this week’s reports.”

Michelle opened the file and began to peruse the data. “Great. Thank you, Brian.” As she glanced again at her team, her eyes landed on Lacy. “What have you got for us, Lacy?”

“I was contacted two days ago by Field Ops and asked to compile data from specific websites with IP addresses originating along the east coast. The data,” Lacy continued, “pointed to communication efforts via comments and blog posts from flagged countries. The IP addresses originated around Metro D.C. and well as Richmond, Charlotte, and a few others I detailed for you in the report.”

“Which flagged countries are we talking about?” Michelle asked.

“North Africa, Tunisia in particular.”

Tensions were high in North Africa and Tunisia was in close proximity to the hostilities of the neighboring nations of Libya and Egypt. It was a hotbed of instability and terrorist activity.

“And you provided the data to your field ops contact?”

“Yes. You may receive a call asking for further analysis. I only scratched the surface and I think those guys may be on to something.”

“Understood.” Michelle pushed back her shoulders and straightened her back. “Myra, what have you got?”

The meeting continued for more than two hours. There were times when Lacy believed it was all in vain—like they were helpless to stop anything. Those were the tough days to get through; San Bernardino, the Boston Marathon. The game was changed, and it was getting harder to stay abreast of the new rules.

“You got a minute?” Michelle approached Lacy while she gathered her things at the conclusion of the meeting.

“Sure.” She followed her boss and waited in her office while Michelle briefly excused herself without explanation. A perfectionist at heart, Lacy became concerned that she’d done something wrong in the meeting. Perhaps someone outside her department, say, Field Ops was dissatisfied with the data she’d turned up on the recent request.

“Sorry about that.” Michelle returned with a manila file folder in her hand. “I just had to go get your file.” She closed the door behind her and returned to her desk. “So, the reason I asked you in here was because we’re going to be adding a new supervisory position and I’m recommending you for the job.” Michelle peered over her reading glasses, anticipating a response.

Lacy’s mouth hung for a moment while she grasped the news. “Thank you, Michelle. I—I’m honored to have your endorsement.” It was finally happening. A masters in computer science, three years at Argus Solutions, and four years as a Data Analyst. Lacy was one of the best in her field and now she was being recognized for it. “When will they make a decision?”

Michelle flipped through Lacy’s personnel file, retrieving her salary information. “They’ve got five candidates, but between you and me, you’re the strongest one. If granted, you’ll be bumped to a GS-12 pay grade. That should be a fairly nice increase for you.”

Lacy had made far more in the private sector, but this would be a significant increase. “That’s great. Do I need to test for the position?”

“No. Not with your credentials. They’ll make the decision by the end of this week. They don’t want to leave anyone waiting in suspense longer than necessary. That’s all I’ve got for now.”

Lacy began to rise. “Thank you for your recommendation. Coming from you, it means a lot.”

“I think you’re making the right call, Dan.” With his chair pushed back and his feet resting on his desk, Jay twirled his pen as he spoke into his cell phone. “Absolutely. We can have it up and running by the end of the month.” He continued to appease one of his best clients.

From the doorway of his office, Jay spotted Owen approaching. The two smiled and he waved him inside.

“Sounds great, Dan. We’ll get it done. Thanks. You too. Bye.” Jay placed his phone on his desk and turned his attention to Owen. “I have to hold his hand every time we do an upgrade.”

“I feel you, man. Oh, thanks again for dinner the other night. We had a great time.” Owen’s face appeared buoyant as he sat across from Jay’s desk.

“Absolutely. It’s great having you two over. You look pleased with something. What’s going on?”

“I just signed Nova Investments. Full package. Two years.” Owen laced his fingers behind his head in triumph.

Jay’s brow creased for an instant before he returned an approving smile to his colleague. “Well, that’s great. I didn’t realize you’d been working on them.” He had approached Nova Investments in the recent past, so it came as a surprise that they’d opted to sign with Owen. It also came as a surprise that Owen was aware of this previous association, yet decided to pursue them anyway. In the world of big commissions, getting stabbed in the back was to be expected, and while Jay didn’t feel Owen had been his Judas, he felt affronted just the same.

“I know you and their security management team didn’t hit it off well initially. Tom over there did mention that to me. I hope you don’t think I tried to steal them from you.”

“Not at all. I’m just happy they signed with the firm. That’s what it’s really all about, right?” Jay lowered his feet to the floor and sat upright in his chair. “I’m happy for you, really.” He checked the time. “Hey, you know what? Why don’t you let me take you to lunch to celebrate?”

“Sure. That’d be great.” Owen pushed to his feet. “Let me just go shoot off a couple of emails. Meet you in the lobby in ten?”

“See you then.” Jay watched Owen walk away and continue along the hall. Lacy’s opinion of Owen had been discussed ad nauseum and Jay never really understood why it was she felt the way she did. He knew it was part of the reason why she left, even if she wouldn’t admit it. But now, seeing his face, he wondered, had she been right? He’d worked for Argus Solutions going on eight years and was one of the top salesmen and he knew he should be happy for Owen. But there was a reason Jay and the security management team at Nova didn’t hit it off. And that reason was what really bothered him.

CHAPTER 2

Ferran Basara switched off the light in his back office and closed the door, returning to the front of the shop. It was past six in the evening and his wife would worry if he didn't come home soon, but Izzah hadn't come in to help today and it had been a good day for business—a very good day—and so he thought she would forgive his tardiness.

The Basaras owned a small electronics shop on the corner of Haven and Centre Street in suburban Baltimore. Having emigrated from Bahrain to the United States in 1994, their children were born here and they'd built their lives here. Ferran even considered taking the exam to become a US citizen so he could be one like his son and daughter.

He began to secure the cabinets where they kept the smart phones and tablets, and turned off the televisions, which aired cricket most of the time.

How they had found out about him, found out where he lived, Ferran still didn't know. They'd approached him weeks ago and the exchange the other day still haunted him. He had heard nothing since then and tried to behave as if all was perfectly normal. Perhaps it had been his brother who still lived in Bahrain or maybe a former acquaintance. Whoever it was sent the devil to his door and there was a price to pay for the sins of his past. When he was a younger, naïve man, Ferran had fallen in with people who he believed wanted the same thing as he did. Known as the uprising of dignity, 1990s Bahrain was in turmoil. Ferran thought his cohorts wanted the democratic reforms that brought about the uprising. Instead, these people made it necessary for him to flee his country. But what was done was done, and if he had turned down the unspeakable request made of him two weeks ago, he and his family would suffer by way of deportation at best, death at worst. Neither seemed practical and so he complied.

As he surveyed his shop and considered the life he'd built, he wondered if they would again come and ask him to fulfill another task for which there would be only one acceptable answer. There had to be a way to keep him and his family safe if they came back. Ferran began to consider a scenario that would make it impossible to continue life as it was today. Could he find a way to go to the authorities and warn them? The bomb was made. The deed was done. He would be the one to go to prison, but his family just might live. Perhaps that was the only solution to consider. Living with the guilt would become unbearable, more so than life in prison, he believed. At least his children would be given a chance to thrive in this country he truly loved.

Ferran's cell phone buzzed in his pants pocket. "Yes? Of course. I'm on my way home now. I will see you very soon." As he ended the call, the front door opened and a man walked in.

He didn't know the name of this man, but the look in the man's eyes told Ferran everything he needed to know about his unexpected visitor. There would be no going to the authorities. There would be no going anywhere now.

The man raised his gun, fitted a silencer, and fired a single, quiet shot. Ferran crumpled to the floor.

The Merrick home was deemed grand by most measures. The house in the luxury neighborhood of Annandale, twenty miles outside of D.C., offered the illusion of security by way of an imposing entrance gate into the community. Lacy was driving through that gate right now in

her late-model Lexus SUV. She was no stranger to the finer things in life, not since leaving Cornell and starting at a large data analysis firm. She left there at the ripe old age of twenty-six at Jay's insistence to work for the upstart cyber-security firm where he'd just been hired on. Nine years, marriage, and two kids had passed since then, and Lacy had never known a less fortunate life. Not a spoiled woman, she valued what she had, but it made the decision to work for the FBI an easy one because money wasn't an issue. And it had been where her heart truly lay. She'd wanted to do something for her country and yet wasn't the gun-slinging field agent-type and so the civilian post suited her well. On Jay's salary alone, they could easily afford their two high-end cars and the 6,000-square-foot home, which rested on nearly an acre of land. The same home upon whose driveway she had now arrived.

Her eagerness to tell the family the news of an impending promotion had given way the moment she was greeted by her children. "Hello, babies." She wrapped her arms around the youngest, four-year-old Jackson, but it wasn't long before his older sister began to feel left out and pushed her way inside the embrace. Olivia was their six-year-old negotiator, always angling for a way to get what she wanted. "Where's Celeste?" Lacy asked.

"In the kitchen, I think." Olivia was the first to answer.

"Let me go and say hi to her and I'll see you two in a minute." Lacy hung her purse on the wall hook in the foyer and headed for the kitchen. "Evening, Celeste. How was your day?"

Celeste was somewhat on in years but had been with the family since Olivia was born. She took care of the children as if they were her own. And since she had none of her own, it seemed to work out well. "I had a good day. The children were well-behaved as usual."

Lacy opened the refrigerator door and grabbed a Diet Coke. "Oh, I'm sure they must've given you some trouble." She popped open the can and gulped down half of it. A self-described Diet Coke fiend, she made no apologies. "Listen, why don't you let me finish up dinner and you can have the evening off?"

Celeste turned away from the oven. "Are you sure? Is everything all right?"

"I realize it's an unusual request." Lacy chuckled. "I just feel like it tonight. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'll enjoy a few extra hours and use them to catch up on my shows." Celeste pulled the dishtowel from her shoulder and rested it on the counter.

"I'm happy to bring you a plate, if you'd rather have dinner in your room tonight."

"Thank you. That would be very nice. Don't I feel spoiled?" Celeste bared her warm smile and retreated to the guest casita attached at the back of the home where she had a kitchenette and small bathroom.

Lacy quickly familiarized herself with the status of the meal preparations and began to take over. It wasn't long before she heard Jay's car pulling into the garage. She glanced at the time and saw that he was right on schedule. 6:30 on the dot. Lacy smiled at the thought of revealing her news.

"Are you cooking?" Jay walked into the kitchen, loosening his tie, and raised a brow at the sight of Lacy at the stove. "Is Celeste sick or something?" He approached her and gave her a tender kiss on the cheek.

"No, she isn't sick. I just thought it'd be nice to cook for my family."

Jay dipped a spoon into the white sauce and sampled it.

"Well? How does it taste?" She had to ask because Jay seemed to fall silent for too long, giving rise to her insecurities as a chef.

"Great. It's great." He patted her on the backside. "Where are the kiddos?"

Lacy pursed her lips and sampled the sauce herself before adding a dash more salt to it. “In the living room. Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. Could you ask them to wash up, please?”

“Kids!” Jay yelled as he made his way into the living room. “Mom says to wash up for dinner.”

Grumbles and groans sounded throughout the expansive family room where the children rested comfortably on the sofa.

A loud clap from Jay and they jumped to their feet and hustled out. “Come on now. You heard me.” Jay continued to the sofa and retrieved his phone, taking a brief moment’s rest. No missed calls, no voicemails, and only one email and it was spam. He stared at the device as though expecting it to bring him some sort of good news that would raise his spirits. Jay had felt Owen nipping at his heels and he knew the Nova account would have secured his place as top sales person. He’d already been managing an account from one of their competitors and maybe that was the reason they’d chosen to sign with Owen, but the other thoughts were the ones gnawing away at him.

It was really no secret why he hadn’t been chosen to be the account manager for Nova. A major retail developer who owned several malls across the country, they were in the process of updating their security software and Jay had put in a bid. Things seemed to be going well enough until their man in charge, the head of security who would be awarding the contract, began to rub him the wrong way. He had been working with them for at least a week when it happened. Tom Neville, their Vice President of Cyber Security, asked what it was like to have an FBI agent for a wife. Jay was taken aback. First of all, how the hell did this guy know that Lacy worked for the FBI? She wasn’t an agent, but that didn’t matter. He’d asked Neville what made him think she was an FBI agent and, of course, all Neville could do was stumble over his words, backpedaling as though he knew he shouldn’t have had that information, as if it had simply slipped from his tongue. He ended up making some sort of excuse that he’d heard it in passing from a colleague. Well, Jay knew that was a pile of horseshit because that kind of information wasn’t easily obtained and only Owen and a few others of his colleagues knew it. They wouldn’t have mentioned anything. At least, he hadn’t thought so. But then again, Owen swooped right in and persuaded Nova to use them and would get the nice six-figure commission for it.

“You coming in for dinner?” Lacy stood in the foyer, peering into the living room at Jay.

“Yeah.” He pushed off the sofa and plastered on a smile. “How was your day?”

“Well, I do have some news...”

The Baltimore police arrived on the scene shortly after Mrs. Basara made the call. Their daughter drove her mother to the shop when Ferran failed to arrive home and was not answering his cell phone. Izzah worked part-time at the shop, after her classes at the local community college, but today, she’d had other plans and didn’t go in. Plans with a boy she hadn’t yet introduced to her parents, which certainly would have irritated Ferran.

The moment the two approached the shop door, they knew something was wrong. They looked at one another and proceeded to check the door. It was still unlocked, and yet, no lights were on inside. Izzah opened it first. “Stay here, Mom.” She stepped inside with caution and found the lights. The fluorescents flickered on and her eyes adjusted. She moved further inside. “Just give me a moment, Mother.” Izzah held out her hand. As she moved closer to the counter, a guttural scream ripped from her throat. She trembled at the sight of her father lying on the floor in a pool of blood, eyes wide open with a hole in his head large enough to see through.

Mrs. Basara ran to her daughter, but Izzah tried to hold her back. “No, Mom, don’t. Don’t look. Daddy’s gone. We have to call the police.”

Detective Coleman arrived soon after the responding officer called dispatch. The body had remained untouched and he noticed the family still huddled near the entrance, distraught. “Who’s the responding officer?”

“I am.” A man in his early twenties approached the detective.

“I was nearby when the call came in.” The officer glanced at the body. “As you can see, he was shot in the head.”

Coleman wasn’t blind and anyone could’ve seen the hole in that man’s head, but he brushed off his irritation. “Anything stolen?”

“No. Nothing at all.” The officer seemed to understand that this was a fact well worth noting, especially in a shop that sold televisions, cell phones, and tablets. “The register wasn’t even opened.”

Detective Coleman nodded and began to approach the family. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I’m Detective Coleman.”

“I’m Izzah and this is my mother, Huma Basara.” She gazed again at her father, his lifeless body turning grey. “Who would do this to my father?” Izzah began to cry.

“That’s what I’m here to find out, miss.”

“Detective?” An officer appeared from the back of the store. “Can you come take a look at this?”

Coleman noticed the officer’s look of concern. “I’ll be right back.” He stepped away from the grieving family and headed toward the back, following the young cop into a small office that seemed to double as storage space. “What is it? What’d you find?”

The officer moved toward Ferran’s desk and opened the pencil drawer. “What does this look like to you, sir?”

Coleman creased his brow and moved in to see what it was that had piqued the officer’s curiosity. He peered inside the desk, and although littered with paperclips and sticky notes, one thing did stand out.

“Is that what I think it is, sir?” the officer asked.

“Looks like a phone that’s been opened up.” He looked at the officer. “Don’t they sell and repair phones here?”

“Yes, sir, but look at this.” The officer used his pinky finger to pinpoint his concerns. “This one’s been wired to transmit only. It doesn’t look complete, though. Like maybe this was one that didn’t work correctly.”

Coleman stared at the insides of the cell phone. “How do you know this?” He knew what the officer was implying and eyed him with suspicion. He wasn’t about to go accusing this family of being involved in some sort of terrorist activity on the basis of what appeared to be broken cell phone parts found in a cell phone store.

“I did two tours in Afghanistan as an EOD Specialist. I was on the bomb squad.”

An understanding suddenly crossed Detective Coleman’s face and he nodded in consideration. “Okay. Let’s call in the Feds.”

Owen swirled the melting ice cube inside his glass of the best scotch money could buy while he sat in front of the fireplace. Seduced by the flames and comforted by its warmth, he imagined what was going through Jay Merrick’s head right about now. He didn’t believe he was a man who

could easily succumb to paranoia, but the look on Jay's face today as they sat in the restaurant discussing the latest baseball scores suggested he was being judged. That somehow Jay had the right to judge him. He knew as well as anyone the cutthroat business they were in and yet Owen had gotten the better of his colleague. "Someone had to knock him down a peg." He tossed back a swig, the melting ice resting against his upper lip as the scotch coated his tongue.

Some people just didn't get along and was that Owen's problem if the guys over at Nova didn't like Jay?

The door to the study opened and Julianne stepped inside. She tried hard to live up to her carefully crafted but plastic persona and Owen was a big part of that. "How you doing, babe? You need anything?" She didn't have any children, although maintained hope that Owen might want more someday. His ex-wife retained custody of their seven-year-old son, who rarely came to stay with Owen and his younger wife.

"I'm fine. I don't need anything, thanks." He glanced down at his empty glass. "Maybe just another drink."

Julianne smiled and retrieved his glass. "You should be happy about today, but instead you sit here staring at the fire when I could easily keep you warm."

"It's just—I think some of the other sales people are pissed that I got that account."

"I'm sure. But then all of you make your living off of commission, so screw them, right? You're all there to do a job and you just happened to do it better this time."

Owen smiled at his beautiful wife. "Thank you. I knew you'd understand."

She returned the smile and with his empty glass in hand, began to leave the room.

"Jules?"

"Yes?" She stopped in her tracks and turned to him again.

"You're happy here, right?" He didn't wait for her reply, but continued, "I mean, you have everything you could possibly want. I've given you everything, haven't I?"

"Of course you have. You make me very happy. Owen, are you sure you're okay?"

He cast his gaze toward the fire once again. "Everything's fine. Everything's going to be fine."

Once he heard the door to his study close again, Owen retrieved his laptop. He logged in under an administrative setting that had been set up for him by his partners. He still wasn't sure if he could go through with it, but he'd gone too far now and there was no turning back. He'd made promises and now it was time to produce.

Several minutes passed while he continued to work and he didn't hear Julianne return.

"Hey, whatchya looking at?"

Owen jumped and slammed down the lid of his laptop. "Jesus! You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry, babe. I was just bringing your drink."

He snatched it from her hands. "I've got a lot of work to do. You mind not interrupting me again?"

She swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. I'll leave you alone." Julianne waited by the door as though he might apologize.

Owen gave her a sideways glance until she left and no apology came. He reopened his laptop and went back to work.

Jay was next to Lacy on the couch with his feet settled on the table, snoozing away. She reached for the remote control and turned off the news, which had just ended. It was a typical night for the two of them. "Jay? Honey, it's time for bed."

His eyes fluttered open as he looked at her. “What time is it?”

“10:30. I’m going upstairs. You should come too.”

“Okay, yeah.” He dragged his feet from the table and pushed off the couch.

Lacy reached for her phone to take it upstairs when it buzzed with an incoming email. “I’d better just take a look at this. See you upstairs in a minute.” She kissed Jay’s lips as he stood on the first step.

“Okay, but don’t be too long.” He trudged up the stairs.

The email header indicated “secure,” which meant if she wanted to read its entire contents, she would have to log in to the FBI’s server and enter her credentials before she could have complete access, something that was easier to do on her computer rather than her phone. She glanced longingly at the staircase, knowing her warm bed would have to wait and instead made the necessary walk along the hallway to her office. Turning on the desk light, Lacy sat down at her chair and turned on her laptop. She typed the command that would take her to the FBI’s server where she would log in. It took a moment for the message to come up—and there it was. Lacy leaned over the desk and squinted her eyes and, a moment later, her expression was changed. Alert and focused, Lacy re-read the email.

“A potential IED detonator was located in an electronics shop in suburban Baltimore and the owner of the shop has been killed. Baltimore police have asked the FBI to investigate and early indications are that the finding is significant. Please be advised that efforts should now focus on the region where the device was located and that the local FBI field office requests the data division to run a search for any suspicious chatter or social media posts regarding an impending attack in and around Baltimore. Further details to follow.”

Lacy logged out and shut down the computer. Her mind searched for anything she might have come across that could point to this finding, but it was late and her head was clouded. This wasn’t the first time she’d received such a warning; in fact, they came much more frequently than in years past. But they always rattled her, as though she might have missed something along the way.

CHAPTER 3

The sketch of a dog urinating on the desk of a colleague bore a striking resemblance to Owen Ballard, but Jay would deny that if anyone happened upon his newly completed doodle. The meeting had dragged on and he often took pencil to paper during such times. Now Jay examined his sketch and a sardonic smile formed on his lips.

“I’d like to conclude our meeting by congratulating Owen for signing Nova Investments to the firm.” The boss began a round of applause. “Well done, Owen. And with that, I think we’re finished here.”

Jay immediately scratched out the drawing as the meeting came to a close. The people in the room dispersed except for Owen, who loitered in the hall, waiting for Jay to step out. He was taking his time, hoping Owen would give up, but it seemed that wasn’t going to happen.

“Do you have a minute?” Owen asked when Jay finally emerged.

“Absolutely. What’s on your mind?”

“Can we talk in my office?”

A quick nod from Jay and the two walked into Owen’s office, Owen closing the door behind him. “Look, I can see that you’re pissed at me for the whole Nova thing. But it’s not like you and I haven’t fought for the same clients in the past.” Owen walked to his desk and sat down, folding his arms in front of him and appearing as though he was scolding Jay. “Why are you so butt-hurt this time?”

A dismissive smile appeared on Jay’s lips. “The problem I have isn’t that you signed them. It’s the fact that you had to have been the one to mention Lacy’s job when it was me who was working them. Why would you do that? It’s none of their damn business what my wife does for a living and, frankly, it isn’t information that should be lightheartedly broadcast, least of all, by you.”

Owen reared up in his chair. “What the hell are you talking about? I never said a goddam thing about Lacy. Who told you this?”

“Tom Neville made some snide comment about Lacy being an FBI agent.”

“She’s not...”

“Yeah, I know that, but the point being is that they knew she worked for the Feds. So, you’re trying to tell me you didn’t mention anything?”

“Of course not. You never came up and Lacy sure as shit never came up. It just seemed to me that the guy didn’t particularly care for you. That was all it was, I thought.”

Jay pursed his lips and studied Owen. “That means they found out on their own and that would only be possible if they did a background check, and I mean the kind of background check that only government officials have the authority to conduct.”

“That just doesn’t make any sense, Jay. They’re a retail developer. Why would they do a background check on anyone except maybe the company they’re hiring to upgrade their security systems?”

“That’s a damn good question.”

“Look, I’ll talk to Neville. I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding.” Owen relaxed his arms. “There was another reason I wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah?” Jay was still on the defensive.

“I was wondering if you wanted to go in on something with me? Something that could be very lucrative.”

“And what might that be?”

“Go golfing with me on Friday. We can talk about it then.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule.”

“Sure. But—you’ll want to do this. Trust me.”

Jay rose from his chair. “I’ve got a few calls to make. Catch up with you later?”

Owen nodded and waited for Jay to leave. He picked up his phone and pressed a contact button. “It’s Ballard. He’ll be out of the office on Friday. Golfing, with me.”

The news of potential bomb elements inside an electronics store in Baltimore put the entire department on high alert. When Lacy arrived, no one wandered the halls or was engaged in idle chitchat around the water cooler. Everyone had their heads down, busily working to ensure nothing was being overlooked.

“Lacy, can I see you for a moment?” Michelle poked her head inside Lacy’s cubicle.

She followed her supervisor into her office. “I just got in and I haven’t had a chance to dig into this thing yet.”

Michelle took a seat at her desk. “I want you to head this one up,” she began. “The case file is in the hands of the Baltimore field office and you’ll need to coordinate with the agent in charge there. He’s going to want anything you can find on chatter in the region, and I mean *anything*. Get with Mike Burke on this too. He’s got good intel on the Baltimore area and between you two and the field office, we should find something before it’s too late.”

The most ominous of words ever to be spoken by Michelle Vogel to date and Lacy grew increasingly nervous. She considered her position and that of the other data analysts as the first line of defense against terrorism. They were the ones monitoring websites, investigating cyber-attacks, and anything else over the internet that might raise a red flag. These were things for which her department was supposed to keep an eagle-eye watch. And that was exactly what Michelle was asking of her now.

“I understand.” Lacy returned to her desk and, only moments later, the man she’d requested to see had arrived. Mike Burke, a twenty-something ladder-climber with exceptional analytical skills along with an innate ability to network the likes Lacy had never seen, even in her own salesman-husband.

“You wanted to see me?” Mike stood tall and with impeccable style. Coiffed hair, a starched blue button down, and black trousers with a cuff that rested on top of his gleaming black shoes.

She thought he might be angling for a job as an intelligence analyst, though that would require admission into Quantico. “Yes. Pull up a chair. I’d like to go over a few things with you on Ferran Basara and his shop in Baltimore.”

He grabbed a chair from a nearby empty cubicle and rolled it next to Lacy. “What have you got?”

The two began to review the information from the Baltimore field office when Mike interrupted. “I understand there’s a good chance you’ll become my new boss in the near future.”

Lacy wasn’t sure how to respond. How much of what she and Michelle talked about was considered confidential and how would Mike have already known about it? It was no secret that there was an opening and perhaps he’d just assumed, but he wasn’t the type to assume anything.

He needed concrete evidence. "It hasn't been decided yet. There are several candidates in the running."

"And from what I gather, you're the most senior."

"We both know that isn't always a deciding factor. We should get back to this."

Mike continued to study her until finally returning his sights to the file on the screen.

Only an hour into their efforts, Lacy's cell phone rang. "Excuse me for just a moment." She snatched it from her desk and walked toward the breakroom. "Hey. What's going on?"

"Listen, I'm sorry to bother you, hon, but I just wanted to ask you something."

Jay was on the other end and she'd wanted to tell him that this was a bad time to talk. "What do you need, babe? I'm kinda swamped right now." There was a brief pause and a moment longer, she would've prompted him again, but then he began to speak.

"How easy is it to get someone's employment history? Specifically, someone who works for the government."

"I'm not sure I get your meaning. You mean the government, in general, or are you asking about a security clearance type of thing?"

"I guess I'm not sure." He paused again.

"What are trying to ask me, Jay?" She didn't want to sound impatient, but there was no time to discuss personal matters, if that was what this was.

"You know that new client I was telling you about that Owen picked up?"

"Yeah, I remember you mentioning it."

"What I failed to mention was that I'd been working with that same client several weeks earlier, trying to get them to sign with me. Their head of security, a man by the name of Tom Neville, failed to see eye to eye with me and it didn't work out."

"Okay."

"Anyway, the real reason why I took issue with the guy was because he mentioned you."

"Me? How would he know anything about me?"

"Exactly. That's what I wanted to know. He asked what it was like to be married to an FBI agent." He continued before she could correct him by stating the obvious. "Aside from the fact that you're not an agent, what concerned me was that he knew you worked for the FBI. How would he have acquired that type of information?"

"You said Owen signed them. Is it possible he said something?"

"That's what I thought at first, but he denies it. And, I think I believe him. That's why I wanted to know about background checks. He might've been conducting a background check on me before agreeing to negotiate a contract with us. Would he have been able to get information on you?"

"No. Not a chance. Well, there's a chance. If he knew someone who had access. Someone who worked for the FBI maybe. But I don't get why this is important."

"I don't know, babe. Maybe it isn't. I'm just getting a weird vibe about this whole contract situation and Owen. I guess I'm looking for something."

Lacy nodded as a colleague entered the breakroom. "I don't think there's anything to worry about here. It sounds like whoever gave him my details didn't get it right anyway. Listen, I've got something in the works right now. We can talk about this tonight, if you want, but I really need to get back to work."

"Is everything all right?"

"It's fine. Just busy. I'll see you tonight, hon. Love you. Bye."

Jay dropped his keys on the foyer table and spotted Lacey in the family room. “Hi, sweetheart.” He approached and leaned in to kiss her. “How was your day? You seemed pretty stressed out when I talked to you earlier.”

She pressed the palm of her hand against his cheek. “No. Just another day at the office.” Lacey patted the seat next to him. “Why don’t you take a load off? How was your day?”

“Okay.” Jay surveyed the home. “Where are the kids?”

“Celeste took them to the park. She’ll be back soon and said dinner was waiting in the oven. I just got home a few minutes ago.”

“Oh, okay.” Jay hiked up his dress pants and lowered himself onto the couch. “I’m still trying to get my head around this whole Nova Investments thing. You think I’m making too big a deal out of this? Like maybe it’s just sour grapes?”

“No. Not at all. If you’re concerned about how Owen might be conducting himself, you should bring it up with Scott. Hey, you’ve been there longer than he has and have brought in a hell of a lot more business. Scott will listen to you.”

“You’re right.” Jay leaned back against the couch. “I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding and I’m really just pissed at myself for losing the commission. It’s just that I already have a client, who’s actually one of Nova’s competitors, so I thought I’d be better equipped to handle their needs. I guess they didn’t think so.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Look at what you’ve provided us with.” She raised her palms upward.

“You work hard too. You contribute.”

“I know that, but I don’t make your kind of money—not anymore.” She leaned back and rested her head on his shoulder. “It’ll all work itself out.”

“Owen says he’s got something he wants to talk to me about tomorrow too.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Don’t know. I’m supposed to go golfing with him in the afternoon.”

“Sounds fun.” Lacy closed her eyes, which had grown weary from the day.

“I’m sure it will be.”

Jay arrived at the office early, expecting to miss half the day golfing with Owen and knowing he needed to get some work done before taking off. He placed his carrier bag on his desk and retrieved his laptop. Waiting for it to boot up, he turned to his window and stared at the street below. The cars shuffled along the road as they maneuvered through the heap of downtown traffic. As he watched them crawl through the busy streets, Jay considered getting to the bottom of this situation on his own. He had his own set of skills that could be useful in figuring out how Tom Neville knew about Lacy. His knowledge of cyber security and, perhaps to a greater extent, bypassing cyber security measures, surpassed many of his counterparts’ abilities.

In his younger years, he’d spent countless hours manipulating online information, only occasionally breaking the law. But then he met Lacy. She made him see that a future with her was more important than spending his time wreaking havoc on people’s lives for whom he’d had even the slightest ill feelings. That didn’t mean he wasn’t still capable of performing said havoc.

He had to know if Owen was the one who told Neville about Lacy’s job. He supposed it didn’t matter that much, except for the fact that he didn’t know why. And if Owen didn’t say anything, Jay needed to know how Neville got the information. It was eating away at him. This was his

family and he didn't much like the intrusion. And then this thing with Owen wanting to discuss a lucrative deal—outside the office. What game was he playing at?

"Morning, Jay. Ready for me to kick your ass on the links today?" Owen stood in the doorway.

Jay swung around, startled by his unexpected arrival. "You're in early today."

"You too."

"Got to take care of some things before we head out later, but I wouldn't count on you kicking my ass," Jay replied.

"Same here. I'll give you a head start, then." Owen smiled. "Catch up later."

Jay's smile faded as Owen disappeared from view. Perhaps there was a way to renege on this golf outing today. Just looking at that man made Jay all the more suspicious. He'd never known Owen to arrive early for anything, let alone work. This day was already starting to reek.

"Hey, buddy." Jay walked into Owen's office. "Listen, I had a few things come up and I'm going to have to bail on our golf game."

Owen's expression shifted in surprise. "Really? You sure about that, man? I mean, I'd really like to talk to you about that deal."

"Right, I remember. Can it wait till next week? Sorry for the short notice. I just don't think I can swing it today. But you should go. I'm sure the other guys will be heading out to the links today anyway. Don't miss out on playing hooky on my account."

"Sure, yeah. Okay, man." Owen seemed to stare directly through Jay's eyes. "The deal can wait. We can reschedule for next week."

"I appreciate that." Jay smacked the doorframe. "Better get back to it, then. Have a great weekend and thanks again for the invite."

He was back in his office, working on a thing that hadn't been urgent at all, but he needed to have something going to keep up appearances. It was only a matter of time before Owen and their other colleagues left for the day and then Jay would get to the truth of the matter.

Only minutes later, Owen passed by his office, briefcase in hand. Jay looked away from his computer. "Take care, man. See you Monday." A smile and a wave accompanied the empty salutation.

Owen nodded and continued down the hall.

Jay waited another thirty minutes, confirming the other sales people had made their way out for the day before taking a final glance into the hallway. All seemed quiet.

It would be foolish for Jay to consider any activity from his office. This was something that would have to be done anonymously and not from an IP address associated with his employer. If someone was going to go through the trouble of looking into his background, then turnabout was fair play.

He stepped inside Owen's office for a quick look-around, not really knowing what he was looking for, and nothing stood out. Jay thought Owen was a friend and perhaps he was. Maybe Jay hadn't given him the benefit of the doubt. What advantage would Owen have by stating any personal facts about Jay or his family? Still, the man had pulled the rug out from beneath him with regard to Nova Investments. They were a huge retail corporation with malls in nearly every major city in the US.

"Jay? What are you doing in here?"

He swung around at the voice that belonged to his manager. "Scott, hey. I was just looking for Owen actually."

"He left with a few of the guys for the day. Headed to the golf course, I gather. I'm surprised you didn't join them." Scott always wore a smile on his face, irrespective of whether or not he was happy. In fact, the bigger the smile, the more trouble in which one might find himself.

"My plate's pretty full, so I figured I'd do my best to wrap things up before the weekend." Jay began to walk out of Owen's office. "Got any big plans with the family?" He placed his hand on Scott's shoulder and escorted him back into the hall with a cool, unflappable mien.

Jay found himself standing in the hall of a run-down apartment building on the other side of town. He knocked on the door and waited with hackles raised by the sounds of a heated argument coming from another apartment at the end of the passageway. He'd traveled well outside his usual environment and began to grow wary of his surroundings. But this was where his buddy said he would meet him. Maybe Jay had become too much of a wuss for his own good. The sheltered surroundings he'd enjoyed these past few years left him attenuated to the realities of this world.

An old friend from college was whom he waited for now. Times had changed since his hacking days and while he tried to stay up to date with the latest technology, he knew he was still out of step, even in his line of work. Luckily, his buddy hadn't "sold out," as he'd so eloquently stated to Jay when he took the job at Argus, and still maintained his premier status in the world of hackers.

The door opened and, much to Jay's surprise, his old friend, Aaron Hunter, stood before him, looking less like an anarchist and more like a businessman. "Aaron. Wow. Did you have an interview today?"

"Everybody's got to earn a living, Jay. Come on in. It's good to see you. What's it been? A year, year and a half?" He stepped aside while Jay entered the small apartment that reeked of fast food. "I got a consulting gig for a small company that needs help setting up their systems."

"That's great, man. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Have a seat." Aaron motioned to the couch. "Sorry about the mess. Maid doesn't come until tomorrow." He winked an eye.

"No problem. Thanks for agreeing to meet. I'm sure my call caught you out of the blue a little bit."

"Yeah, well, you sounded kind of desperate. What's the deal?" He took a seat. "Lacy all right?"

"Oh yeah. It's nothing like that. I just need some help looking into something."

An inquisitive grin masked Aaron's face. "Sounds interesting."

"I don't know how interesting yet, but I've been out of the loop for a while and I was hoping you could help me with getting in to the back door of Nova Investments."

"Aren't they the mall guys? Why they got you concerned?"

"It's one guy in particular, but if I'm going to go in, I might as well go all in and see what they're about. They're a new client of ours."

"Really? And you want to hack one of your own clients?"

"They aren't really *my* client. One of my coworkers signed them up recently, but I've met with them before and I don't know, I guess I just don't get that warm, fuzzy feeling about them, you know?"

"Sure. I'll help you out." Aaron stood and walked toward a small desk on which his laptop rested. He opened the lid and booted it up.

Jay soon followed and stood next to him. "You plan on accessing it through TOR?"

"I'm impressed," Aaron began. "And a little surprised you're still at least somewhat up to speed on these things."

"I do work in cyber security."

"Right; security." He chuckled. "The Onion Router isn't something you'd use on a daily basis, but, yeah, that's the best way for me to go in unseen. It will route me through servers all over the world and go through several random relay nodes, so it can be slow as shit, but it'll keep me anonymous. Then I can see what kind of systems they've got."

Jay checked the time. "How long you think this'll take?"

"Don't know. You in some kind of rush?"

"Just wanted to get back home before the missus arrived."

Aaron continued typing commands in to his laptop, swerving and dodging usual internet protocols until reaching his final destination; Nova Investments' email server. "What's the guy's name?"

"Tom Neville," Jay began. "His email address is tneville at novainc dot com."

Aaron typed in a few more commands and, in a flash, a screen with several emails appeared on his laptop. "I'm in. What are we looking for here?"

"Anything relating to me, specifically, or Argus Solutions in general." Jay widened his stance and folded his arms, waiting for evidence of Tom Neville's deceit. Once he could prove they ran an illegal background check on Lacy, or him, for that matter, he would take it up with his manager. And if it meant Owen was aware, he could lose his commission and probably his job.

Aaron ran a search to include the criteria and several emails were highlighted. Jay leaned in to get a better look. With his index finger, he pointed to one. "Can you open that up?"

A single click was all it took to reveal what Jay had already suspected. Except that there was something more. "What the hell?" He looked to Aaron. "Am I reading that right?"

Aaron looked over his shoulder at Jay. "I think you got a situation here, man."

CHAPTER 4

Exhaust from his idling car drifted forward to the driver's side and caught Jay's eye. He glanced at the white, steamy cloud as it floated by, pondering what he'd just seen at Aaron's place. He glanced to the passenger seat where his carrier bag rested. Inside was a flash drive that contained the damaging evidence. Aaron copied the emails onto the drive for him to use as he saw fit. Problem was, Jay didn't know what was fit for him to do.

His phone was propped up inside one of the cup holders in the center console. Jay wanted to call Lacy, but he knew she was busy with work. Not only that, he couldn't be sure what to say to her in any case. He needed to think about this.

The information would be scandalous and would cost Argus Solutions dearly, meaning it would also cost Jay and his family dearly. The company would lose most, if not all of its clients and Jay would definitely lose his job, even if he had not been the one responsible. He would still have to account for how he received the information.

Tom Neville was running background checks on everyone at Argus. That alone wasn't the cause for Jay's distress. It was that Neville had inside help from Argus. Help that not only allowed them to conduct such reprehensible invasions of privacy against the staff, but also Nova's competitors, including the Dalian corporation, his own client. And now Jay had a choice to make. One that would require in-depth consideration for all the lives that would be affected by his disclosure.

He pulled the gearshift into drive and headed onto the highway. He needed time to think; time to be alone and consider his course of action. A sign ahead grew larger as Jay drew nearer. Twenty minutes from home, he knew this sign and had passed it almost every single day. Fairfax Fashion Square. The largest mall in the county and it happened to be owned by Nova Investments.

The idea that he needed to go there burrowed deep in his mind, as if propelled by some force that would see to it that Jay righted this wrong. The exit ramp approached and he veered right. The massive retail mall sat on over 150 acres of prime Virginia real estate. It was a relic of a business model struggling to survive in the digital age. Perhaps gaining insight into the plans of their competitors was the reason Neville and Ballard took it upon themselves to commit what amounted to corporate espionage in Jay's mind.

The main entrance was just ahead and Jay pulled into the nearest parking spot. He stared at the backlit sign, beautifully crafted in iron and masonry, elegant in its enormity. What could he do? A deep breath and his eyelids fell shut for a moment. He would clear his head from thoughts of losing his job and taking down a company to which he owed so much. His status, his money; all of it was owed to Argus Solutions.

Jay stepped out of his car into the temperate early evening air and squinted at the fading sun. He still had some time before Lacy would be home and he would buy her something nice. Something that might soften the blow when the time came. And who knew if he would have the money to buy her anything nice again.

He pressed the remote to lock his Mercedes. As he watched the headlights flash, signaling that it was now secure, he realized just how much debt they were in. It hadn't occurred to him before because the money flowed into their bank account with increasing speed, but how easily that could all change if the spigot was turned off.

Jay arrived inside the great marbled entrance that showcased a sophisticated space full of high-end retailers, the likes that could be found along Rodeo Drive. He hoisted his carrier bag higher on his shoulder as it began to slip from his suit jacket and walked toward the jewelers. He would get Lacy something nice.

“Good evening, sir. May I help you?” A slender, attractive young woman with billowing curls of jet-black hair stood poised behind the glass counter.

“Yes, thanks. I was looking for a pair of diamond earrings for my wife.”

“Of course, right over here.”

Jay followed beside the woman and noticed her blouse puckered a little at her breasts, revealing a tantalizing black bra beneath. He quickly averted his eyes to avoid detection.

“I have a pair of lovely two-carat each, round cut earrings with exquisite clarity right here.” And she went right for the jugular.

Jay looked at the large diamond earrings and noted there was no price tag and remembered the saying that if one had to ask, then one couldn't afford. Still, what did it matter right now? Everything was about to change and if he wanted to get Lacy these much too expensive earrings, what difference could it make? She deserved something beautiful and he knew that lately they'd begun to drift apart. Both so busy with work; neither trying particularly hard to make a course-correction. “I'll take them.” A smile formed on his lips as he withdrew a credit card from his wallet.

“So these are for your wife?”

Coquettish to say the least, and it was a feature she could easily produce.

“Yes.”

“Anniversary gift?”

“No. Just a nice surprise, I hope.” Jay signed the receipt and collected the bag with the box that cradled the eight-thousand-dollar earrings.

“I'm sure she'll be thrilled, sir. Have a lovely evening.”

Jay tilted his head in acknowledgement and began to leave the store. With his carrier bag still on his shoulder, he unzipped the side flap and tucked the bag inside. He stopped and turned to his left. A Starbucks was just ahead and he needed a good strong coffee right now.

Making his way further inside the mall, Jay noticed how busy it was, then recalled that it was a Friday night and a clear evening. That might account for the heavy foot traffic that he was now forced to navigate for a coffee he considered might not be worth the effort.

It was in that moment Jay began to hear raised voices in the distance. People looked past him and turned their shoulders because they'd heard it too. He raised to his tiptoes for a better view and could see nothing except more people. Some were beginning to run toward him. Jay's pulse climbed quickly and his head grew light when he began to decipher the words coming from those who were running.

“Bomb! There's a bomb! Run!” A man whose face was white and glistened with panic rushed past Jay.

Terror began to erupt around him. People screamed and ran, dropping their bags. Some grabbed their children's hands, some froze in place. Jay was one of those people. His feet wouldn't move, though he tried with all his strength. *Run, Jay. You have to run.* The voice in his head demanded he run, but Jay noticed a boy. He was alone and crying. No one was stopping to help and God only knew where his parents were.

He had to get the boy, except the boy was deeper inside the chaos; closer to this bomb they shouted about. But Jay couldn't let him die. The boy looked to be the same age as his own son.

The bag slipped from his shoulder and fell to the ground, and Jay ran to the crying child. People began to trample and kick the bag and its contents flew out. He'd forgotten to zip it back up.

No matter now, he had to save this child and crucial seconds were passing and there was no time to worry about material things. He reached the boy and swept him up into his arms. "I've got you. It's okay." Jay turned to run again when the sound of the explosion pierced his ears. The heat and energy from the blast propelled them several feet, smashing them into the wall of the elevator. They fell to the ground.

His body felt like it was on fire, but he didn't see any flames. The boy was still beneath his arm. Jay didn't know if he was alive. He wasn't sure he was even alive except that the sounds around him still filled his head. The screams. Smoke lingered in the air above him, thick and black. Jay was fading fast and as he looked down he realized his injuries might prove too much. Blood pooled all around them, but he couldn't be sure if it was from him or the boy. Perhaps it was both. His vision darkened and his eyes closed.

Lacy held Jay's hand as he lay on the gurney, still unconscious. The doctors and nurses pushed the gurney along the corridor until they reached the operating room.

"Ma'am, you'll need to stay here. I'll have one of the nurses give you an update as soon as we know something."

She stared at Jay's battered and burned face and had only just arrived as they began to prepare him for surgery. They thought they'd stopped the bleeding but his abdomen swelled and turned purple. They had to open him up now.

"Ma'am! I need you to step aside, please," the doctor said.

Lacy released his hand and Jay's fingers slipped through hers. They disappeared behind the doors while she stood helpless until startled by hands that grabbed her shoulders.

"Why don't you come with me, ma'am? I'll show you to the waiting room." A petite nurse with a compassionate face led Lacy to the waiting room. She was not alone. The hospital was overtaken by casualties from the explosion.

The faces around her revealed the devastation. Swollen eyes, stained cheeks, shocked expressions. And they were all waiting to hear of their loved ones, just as she was. Lacy lowered herself onto the chair and turned her head up to the television. The dark skies made it difficult to see the full breadth of damage, but fires still burned and red and blue lights flashed at the scene. News reporters were broadcasting live while the anchors tried to find words to convey the destruction.

"We don't know how long it will take the firefighters to put out the blaze," one reporter on scene began. "And as you can see behind me, they've set up a triage for the injured. Marc, back to you at the studio."

She turned away from the television. It was surreal and she had to remind herself that it was really happening and it wasn't just a nightmare. Lacy worked with the probability of a terrorist attack on a daily basis, though the officials hadn't uttered those words yet, but it never occurred to her that it could happen here, just down the road a few miles from her home.

When the news first broke, only minutes after the explosion, Lacy had just arrived home. An alert sounded on her phone and she immediately dialed Jay's line, but he didn't answer. Nor did he answer his office line and she became worried. He had no reason to be at the mall and she tried to remember that. But when she called again, still with no answer, she began to fear the worst. The

app on her phone would tell her his last known location and so she tried it. The little blue blip on the map showed he had been at the mall.

She didn't know how much time passed from that moment until now. Celeste safeguarded the children, making sure they hadn't seen what had happened on the news. Lacy insisted they not know anything of it until she could find Jay and be sure he was all right.

The logical step was to come here, to this hospital. It was the closest to the mall and after some wasted time trying to gain the attention of someone who could help, she managed to pull a nurse aside and beg for her assistance. The hospital was manic as people arrived one after the other with various injuries—some severe, some minor.

The nurse checked the computer system and Jay's name had not come up.

"Please, can you just check the ER?" Lacy had asked. "He has to be here."

The nurse had found him and now Jay was in surgery and she had no idea if he would pull through.

"Mrs. Merrick?" A doctor entered the room and all eyes shifted to him until he'd called for Lacy. Their collective disappointment was all too apparent.

"I'm Mrs. Merrick." Lacy rose from the chair and her heart leapt into her throat. "Is my husband okay?"

The doctor pulled her aside. "Your husband has suffered extensive internal damage. His spleen has been removed along with part of his liver. The force of the blast..." He trailed off for a moment. "They've managed to stop the bleeding, but it's very touch and go right now."

Lacy raised her hand to her mouth in shock. "Can I see him—please?"

"I'm afraid he's not awake, Mrs. Merrick, and it may be a while." The doctor glanced into the corridor. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I need to get back. There are still many people who need my help."

Lacy's blank stare finally broke as she nodded to the doctor. All she could do now was wait.

"Mrs. Merrick?"

Lacy opened her eyes, which had grown swollen with tears, and blinked a few times as they cleared to see a nurse standing in front of her. "Is Jay awake?" She lowered her legs to the ground and sat upright.

"Yes, you can see him now."

To hear that he was alive made her heart soar. Lacy followed the nurse to the ICU recovery area. The chaos had settled, but people were still being brought in and Lacy hadn't a clue as to how long she'd been there.

The nurse pulled back the curtain. "Just a few minutes, okay? He needs to rest."

Lacy nodded. "Thank you." She turned to see Jay wrapped in bandages with wires sticking out of him. He was in bad shape, but he was alive. "Hi, baby." The tears spilled as she spoke.

"I'm okay." His tone was soft and quiet, hardly noticeable. "Don't cry."

This only made her cry harder. "What were you doing at the mall, sweetheart?" She didn't know why she asked that question because none of it mattered. Her husband was here and he was alive. "Never mind. I'm just happy to hear your voice and look into your eyes."

She reached for his hand.

"What about the boy?"

"What boy, honey?"

“The boy I tried to save.” His bandaged face twitched as his eyes squinted with pain.

“I—I don’t know, but I’ll try to find out.”

“How many dead?”

“Last I heard, it was about 234. Lots of people injured.” She shook her head. “I just can’t believe you were there. I’m so grateful you’re alive.”

He tried to sit up but hardly moved an inch. “I need my bag.”

“Lie down, baby. You’re not supposed to be moving.” She began to search around his bed and the chair next to him but saw none of his personal belongings. “I don’t know where they’ve put your things. But there’s nothing you should be worrying about right now, okay? Please, just try to rest.”

“I need my bag.” Jay lifted his head, but the pain was too great and it shot across his face. The monitors began to beep quickly.

“Honey, please. I’m sure they’ve got it somewhere. You shouldn’t be moving.” Lacy knew he always kept his laptop bag with him but couldn’t figure out why he needed it so badly right now. “Who was this boy? Do you know his name?” She tried to divert his attention for his own good.

“No. He was alone. I tried.” He cringed again.

“Okay, okay. You don’t need to explain now.” She placed her hand on his chest. “Just relax.” The monitors weren’t slowing. In fact, they were growing louder. Lacy began to look for a nurse. “Hey, is there anyone here who can help?” Her voice was shaky as she leaned beyond the curtain. “Hello? We need some help in here.”

The beeps sounding from the monitor turned flat. Lacy spun back and looked at Jay. His eyes had closed. “Jay? Honey?” Panic charged through her as she turned to the opening in the curtain again. “Help! Please, someone, help!”

Two nurses ran to her and pushed their way inside the tiny space.

“Please step aside, ma’am,” one of the nurses spoke. “Page Dr. Hines now!”

Lacy stepped back as the nurses worked, shouting codes and numbers and things she didn’t understand. Her body shuddered as she watched them work.

“Crash cart!” the nurse yelled.

A doctor soon rushed inside, rolling a device that Lacy recognized from television shows. Paddles and some electronic box. A defibrillator, she thought it was called.

“Can someone get her out of here?” the doctor demanded.

“Ma’am, let’s step outside so the doctor can do what he needs to do.” One of the nurses pushed Lacy back.

“No! That’s my husband in there! Please, I need to stay.”

“Ma’am, let them do their job—please.”

Lacy’s eyes raced back and forth as she stared at the curtain that was now closed. *Please, please, God, don’t let him die.* The nurse still held on to her so she wouldn’t push inside, which she most certainly would have done, if given the chance.

Now all she could hear were commands being shouted by the doctor, metal things dropping to the floor, nurses responding to the orders. It was too much. He was supposed to be okay. They said he just needed rest. They said more than that, but she didn’t want to hear it. And now this was happening.

“Time of death. 11:34 p.m.” The words came from someone behind the curtain.

The nurse turned to Lacy. “I’m so sorry, ma’am. If you’ll come with me.” She began to usher her out of the area.

“No. I have to see him. Please.” Lacy began to break away from the nurse’s grip.

“You can’t. Not right now. They’ll come and get you soon. I promise.” She again took hold of Lacy’s arms. “Please. We have to go now.”

Resigned, Lacy followed the nurse out of the room. She was in shock, having just spoken to her husband only moments ago and now he was gone; the victim of what was a presumed terrorist attack. An attack that she should have prevented.

“My husband asked about his bag,” Lacy began. “Can I get his belongings, please?” She needed something of his to hold. Something that would smell like him, something that he touched. This couldn’t be the end. He couldn’t have left her.

“Just have a seat in here and I’ll go find out where his things are. Again, I’m so sorry, ma’am.”

Lacy was alone in a room occupied by other victims’ families. As she glanced at the television mounted on the wall, she saw that the fires had been all but extinguished, but smoke soared in the night sky. It was approaching midnight and Lacy had just lost not only the love of her life, but her best friend and father of her children.

From the author:

I hope you enjoyed this exclusive read! [Primal Deception](#) is available for pre-order on Amazon and will be released on October 18th, 2016!