

Major Atropos was uncomfortable. He was also hot and tired, but mostly he was uncomfortable. His flak vest was constricting his movement and kept pushing his Kevlar helmet forward on his head, which in turn pushed his ballistic eyewear down on his nose. His protective mask was jammed between his thigh and the door of the up-armored HMMWV in which he rode. His knees were perilously close to the seatback in front of him in which Lieutenant Y rode shotgun. Every bump or brake made Atropos wonder how anyone taller than his modest frame could sit there. To his left in the other back seat was Sergeant Z, the division operations officer's driver. Sergeant Z was not your typical infantryman. He was a New York City cop who enlisted shortly after 9/11. He was older and smarter than your average E-5, which made him good company for the older officers in the division operations section (the G-3).

Atropos looked around inside the vehicle. This version of the venerable HMMWV (Hummer or Humvee, as civilians called it) was much different than the first armored ones he had experienced in Bosnia in the late-nineties, and was a vast improvement to what soldiers used during the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003. "You go to war with the Army you have," Secretary Rumsfeld had famously said, and in many cases that Army was ill-equipped for the mission. Even the truck Atropos was in, with all its bells and whistles, was insufficient against most IEDs the enemy was using. MRAPs, designed specifically to defend against this threat, were pouring into the country, and were already saving lives. Riding around in Humvees was kind of a crapshoot, a vehicular Russian Roulette.

Major Atropos recalled fondly his days as a lieutenant, riding around in a soft-skinned Humvee with the doors off, zipping through the woods of Fort Polk, Louisiana. He was an air defense artillery officer back then, and a different kind of target. He supported a maneuver battalion (or squadron in this case, as he was in the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment (Light)—the "Light" meaning there wasn't any armor in the unit, despite the name), and his was one of the few vehicles running around the "battlefield" with four radios: two 524s, one on the squadron net and one on the platoon net, a 442, which was a "receive only" radio tuned to the early warning net, and a GRC-160 to monitor the air defense battery's frequency. In those days, four radios meant four antennae, making the vehicle a prime target for enemy aircraft—something Major Atropos found out during a JRTC rotation in which the OPFORs Soviet Hind helicopter took out his vehicle. He remembered how crowded all those radios made the front of his vehicle, and noted this hadn't changed, even with the advent of the SINCGARS radio. In the front of this truck was all manner of electronic components, only some of which he recognized: Blue Force Tracker, SINCGARS, Warlock frequency jammers, Boomerang sniper detection systems, and the like.

There wasn't a lot of talking in the truck as the noise precluded it. The driver and lieutenant could still hear each other over the din, and Major Atropos was pretty sure the lieutenant had a dismountable radio on him in case they had to get out of the truck and conduct operations. He certainly hoped this wouldn't be the case. Being on the division staff, he didn't get out of the headquarters much, so he hoped this trip would be as uneventful as the few others he'd taken. The latest intel he'd heard was that the enemy had been hiding IEDs in animal carcasses and triggering them manually as convoys passed. He was scanning the road for dead dogs...hoping for more than the usual reasons not to see one.

Atropos felt the concussion of the explosion before he heard it. The four-vehicle convoy had been negotiating a nearly 90-degree left turn when the second vehicle was lifted in a geyser of dirt and flame. No sooner had this registered with the occupants of the third vehicle, the one he was in, then the report of small arms fire was heard on the left side of the vehicle.

"Drive! Drive!" The lieutenant screamed at the driver, and then immediately was on the radio to the rest of the convoy. "Ambush! Ambush! Push through! Pu—" The second explosion lifted the back left of the Humvee as it raced forward. Sergeant Z's door was torn off its hinges as the explosion ripped through the frame, sending shrapnel everywhere. The truck landed at an awkward list—clearly the rear left wheel was gone—and some of the bullets found their way in through the gaping hole, ricocheting off the window to Major Atropos's right. The ones that didn't come in were hitting the side of the vehicle, and Sergeant Z. Major Atropos's ears were ringing, but through the dust and smoke he could see the driver trying to keep the disabled truck going and the lieutenant twisting in his seat and yelling towards the back. Major Atropos couldn't hear the lieutenant, but he could read his lips: "Get out!"

The major looked back at Z, who hadn't moved much since the explosion—except for slight spasms whenever he was hit by small arms fire. Atropos unhooked his seatbelt (yes, they wore them) and reached over to release Sergeant Z's, not realizing it was the only thing keeping him upright. As soon as it was released, Z started falling out of the vehicle. Major Atropos turned and grabbed the sergeant with both hands, and immediately felt a hard slap on the top of his helmet and a harder one on his collar bone that forced him back, causing him to lose his grip with his right hand. He glanced at the front of the vehicle and saw the driver climbing over the communications gear in order to exit the vehicle out the lieutenant's door. The major's left hand had a tenuous hold of the right armpit of Z's flak vest, but he could feel it slipping as his right hand grabbed the seat in front of him to regain his balance. He again moved forward to grab the sergeant, who was slowly slumping toward the hole where his door had been. Just then a bullet struck Major Atropos on the right breast of his vest, and another tore into his

bicep, just below where the flak vest ended. He let go of Z's flak vest and fell back awkwardly into the door behind him, which was being opened by the driver, who grabbed him and pulled him out of the truck onto his back. The driver was also yelling something unintelligible. He was pointing away from the gunfire and pulling on the major.

"We've got to get Sergeant Z!" Major Atropos yelled. The driver shook his head and kept pulling on the major, who could see rounds hitting the inside of the open door and could feel them whistling by. He struggled to his feet and began a stooped run in the direction the driver was pulling him. He stole a glance behind him, and didn't see Sergeant Z.

Chapter 1

The bells roused the watchmaker out of his daydream. Those damn bells. He hated them, but they were a necessary evil, as they signified the arrival (or departure) of a customer. He thought it somewhat odd that he should hate them, given the fact that they usually signaled income. It was the conundrum of watchmakers in general. In order to complete the work, one needed uninterrupted time at the bench. But uninterrupted time meant delaying or ignoring customers, if you did it properly and kept certain hours when you locked the door and didn't answer the phone. The work had to get done, or there was no income. The watchmaker felt he didn't *quite* have enough business to justify uninterrupted hours during the normal day. Close, but not quite.

He looked down. He'd been working on replacing a pallet stone, one of his least favorite things to do. He probably should have locked the door when he started that. Now he'd have to start over, as the shellac was probably already dry. This time it would be hard to blame the customer though. Who knew how long he'd been daydreaming, and what about? Oh yes. Iraq. Again.

The customers were young, probably late teens or early twenties. "Battery," the watchmaker, whose name was Bob, muttered to himself as soon as he saw them through the opening that led into the front room. "Should have locked the door." He stepped from behind his bench, careful to avoid the cabinets full of crystals, mainsprings, hands, stems, and the other parts and supplies he had collected over the years he'd been doing this, first as a hobby and then as a second career. His shop didn't look like those pristine, uber-organized, clean rooms that were touted in the pages of *Horological Times* magazine. Nor did it look how one might picture a watchmaker's shop to be: cluttered, untidy, and full of old things and tiny tools, with a wizened old man peering through a loupe at some ancient relic. In truth, the shop was somewhere in between. There was certainly clutter, as the watchmaker hated throwing things away that *might be useful* in the future. But the clutter had order, and more importantly, he knew where everything was.

"How can I help you today?" He greeted the couple with a smile. The young man looked at his companion.

"I need a new battery for my watch. Do you do that here?" She looked around as if she suddenly found herself in a foreign country.

"Yes, I can do that for you."

"How much?"

"Ten dollars, plus tax," Bob replied, knowing what was coming next. He liked to make them say it anyway.

“Walmart only charges five,” was the oft-repeated reply.

“True, but there your battery is changed by someone with five minutes of training who was trained by someone with five minutes of training. Here, your battery is changed by someone with years of schooling and experience, who will not only change your battery, but will also check your circuit to ensure your movement is functioning properly, replace your gasket to ensure the watch is protected from the elements, and, if it is supposed to be waterproof, will make sure it still is.” He watched them as he was saying this, and he wasn’t sure if any of it was registering. It seemed as if they were making mental computations to determine if what he said was worth the extra five dollars.

“Um, okay,” she said after a pause, handing over her watch. Now he knew why she hesitated. This watch probably didn’t cost much more than ten dollars, new.

“Give me a few minutes,” he said, as he turned to head back to his bench. Once there, he looked at the watch under his loupe. Pretty grimy, which was fairly normal—most folks don’t think about cleaning their watches. He took off the band so he could quickly clean the case, especially where the stems connected the band to the case. He pried the back off with a case opener and looked inside. Nothing seemed amiss. After testing the circuit, he inserted the fresh battery. He pulled out the worn gasket and fitted a new one, after coating it with silicone. He replaced the back and attached the band, ensuring the stem springs were still functional. There was no need to do a waterproof test. He set the time and date and walked back out front.

“I was able to reuse your gasket by coating it with silicone, so it will only be seven dollars.” He had no idea why he did this. He just didn’t feel right charging her the equivalent of the value of the watch.

Her face lit up. “Oh, thank you, I appreciate that.” She paid, and, after an exchange of pleasantries, the couple left.

Bob sighed and looked at his wrist, which ironically, was bare. He looked around and realized somewhat sheepishly that he had nothing in the front room that displayed the current time. “That’s odd,” he thought, and headed back to his bench. His watch was off to one side—he usually took it off when he worked. He picked it up and studied it. Today he’d chosen to wear his Tutima FX Chronograph with white dial and a stainless-steel case and band. He’d purchased this as a gift to himself for being extended three months in Iraq, when his unit’s 12-month deployment was lengthened to 15 as part of the surge. Bob had always wanted a “nice” watch, and this one was an entry-level, higher-end model,

paid for by the money he received during the extra 90 days in country. Maybe this was the reason for the daydream?

It was three o'clock. Although he closed in an hour, he locked the door early in order to focus on the pallet. He sat down at his bench and studied the watch in front of him. It was a beautiful Waltham open-faced pocket watch from the early 1900s. Although the dial was fairly plain, the movement inside was exquisitely engraved. The owner had found it in a box of his late grandfather's possessions and wanted it to work again. It was quite clean, but upon opening the back of the case, Bob had discovered that one of the pallet stones had simply fallen off. Whether this was the result of the watch being dropped or just a natural function of long dormancy was unclear. Fortunately, the stone itself was undamaged, which was good. He wouldn't have to hunt for one that fit—no small task, since these stones were very small and a bit oddly shaped.

The watch was completely dismantled, cleaned, and checked thoroughly. None of the 21 jewels that held the pivots and arbors were cracked, and the click, set-lever, and hairsprings were in good shape. The main spring had to be replaced, which wasn't a surprise. The pallet appeared to be the only issue. Bob wouldn't be sure until everything was back together and he could check the beat and accuracy in all positions. The gear side of the watch was oiled, greased, and assembled up to the escapement, which was awaiting the pallet repair.

As long as Bob could remember he had been fascinated by watches. When he was very young he used to play with an old Sentinel pocket watch at his grandmother's house. Much later he learned that watches of that type were called "dollar watches" because they cost a dollar and were cheaply made (no jewels versus the Waltham's 21). Later, at an auction, he found the same style of Sentinel and bought it, cleaned it up, and got it working—sort of. His dad would regularly give him his old watches, the first being an Orvin dive watch that had some connection to his father's service in Vietnam, and the second being a late-seventies Seiko Automatic Chronograph, known as a "Pepsi dial" due to the red and blue tachymeter scale around the crystal. Bob got the Seiko while in junior high school, and it was ridiculously large on his wrist, but he wore it anyway.

The watch that sparked Bob's interest in watchmaking was his grandfather's 1949 Hamilton dress watch (the "Gilbert") that he found in a box. Those were the early days of the internet, and Bob discovered that Hamiltons were desirable and that this one was in a solid gold case. This led him to a local watchmaker for a restoration, which led to weekly two-hour lessons at \$40 apiece.

Bob liked the fact that watches were little machines that could be repaired and maintained with the right tools and training—bringing them back from the dead, if you will. This may have stemmed from

his father's stories about working on cars as a young man, combined with Bob's constant desire to be handy—the feeling that not being able to fix something yourself made you less of a man.

Bob turned on the radio and began the repair. He liked listening to what used to be the “oldies” station but now played a lot of ‘80s music...the implication being that these were the new oldies, although that was left unsaid. “Girlfriend in a Coma” by the Smiths was playing. Bob smiled, as he hadn't heard this song on the radio since his college days. It always shocked him when he realized the ‘80s were thirty years in the past, so he tried not to think about it. Soon he was lost in the repair, heating the pallet over an alcohol lamp, removing the old shellac, applying some to the stone, and setting it into the pallet, matching the relative placement of the other stone as a starting point. Once complete, he let it sit, perhaps in an overabundance of caution.

It was 3:30, so Bob began to clean everything up and get ready to close the shop. He switched the radio over to NPR to hear some news while he worked.

“Stocks were down sharply today as the market reacted to remarks by the Chair of the Federal Reserve yesterday...” Bob covered the partially completed Waltham to protect it, replaced the lid on the parts box containing the removed pieces, including the pallet, and put his tools away.

“Finally, in what is being called the Miracle in Minnesota, an airliner suffered complete engine failure just before landing at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport. The Airbus A321 operated by Delta Airlines crash-landed onto the runway, collapsing its landing gear, and skidded over a thousand feet before coming to a stop in the middle of two main runways. Although it caught fire, quick action by the airport's emergency response crew, as well as the crew on board, prevented any loss of life. Several passengers were taken to local hospitals in critical condition.”

Bob tidied up the rest of the shop, turned off the radio and moved to the front door. As he got ready to turn out the lights, he paused, and looked at his watch: 4:03. He wondered if he would run into her. He hoped he wouldn't. He just wasn't up to it today. For many reasons.

The “her” in question was his “neighbor” on the street where the watch shop was located. Madame Leroux ran the mystic shop next door, *Beyond the Veil*. She was a purveyor of all things other-worldly: Symbology, Numerology, Palmistry, Tarot, and the like. Madame L opened her shop a few months after Bob had settled in; obviously he wouldn't move in next to a place like that on purpose. He felt it cheapened his pursuits somehow, although he wasn't sure what he would have preferred there. Maybe a nice used book store or, better yet, an antique store since people were always bringing in watches they found at antique stores. There were already too many antique stores in town, so chances weren't high that one would move in next door. He was grateful, however, that she didn't appear to

deal in the occult, or aliens. When she opened, Bob did the neighborly thing and went over to introduce himself.

The first thing that hit him was the generic incense smell, which was a bit overpowering, at least to him. Bob had always had a rather heightened sense of smell. The second was the color. Instead of overhead lighting, the store used a bunch of lamps, floor and table, and all were covered by scarves. The color that day was apparently red, which made Bob feel like he had descended into Hell. It was very warm in the store as well, which added to that feeling. Each section of the store was devoted to a different practice, and hand-lettered signs helped the lesser-informed guests find what they sought: Runes, Crystals, Zodiac, Tarot, and many others. There were throw rugs and comfy chairs throughout, some arranged around small tables that contained what Bob assumed were crystal balls. He seemed to be the only one in the room.

“Good afternoon,” a voice suddenly said, seemingly out of nowhere. It was an imperious, over-the-top seer kind of voice, attached to a small woman in flowing robes with a scarf around her head. “How can I be of service to you today?”

“*You tell me,*” Bob wanted to say, but instead he said, “I’m Bob, I run the watch shop next door. I just wanted to come over and welcome you to the neighborhood.” He tried his best not to look judgmental (or even *think* that way—just in case).

“Oh, charming! I’m Madame Leroux,” she said, touching his outstretched hand with just the tips of her fingers, like the Queen of England. She pulled them back quickly, as if she’d touched fire. “Oh!” she exclaimed, eyes widening. “Oh, my goodness. We absolutely *must* sit down and talk sometime. You’ve had quite a life, haven’t you? And quite a future, I think...” Her voice trailed off a bit, but her eyes never left his.

“*What the—*” Bob thought. He didn’t really know how to respond to that. “Um, well, yes, that would be nice. Unfortunately I have to get back to the sho—”

“You are a watchmaker, are you not?” she interrupted.

“Yes,” he stammered—the words were getting stuck in his throat. “Yes, certified watchmaker.” Bob had no idea why he added that.

“Isn’t the concept of time peculiar? It’s funny what humans come up with to explain the mysteries of the universe. Somehow it comforts them to make things more predictable, more controllable. But it really isn’t, is it Bob? You know, don’t you?” The way she said *humans* made it seem like she wasn’t one. Bob was thrown. He spent many of his waking hours controlling time, beating it into

submission. But peculiar? No, Bob didn't think time was peculiar at all. He was comforted by the *regularity* of it. In fact, many early watches carried the moniker *Regulator*.

"Well, I...I kind of think of it as a constant...marching along without the slightest consideration for us humans." He hoped that would be the end of it.

She looked at him, her lips pursed. "So you *don't* know," she whispered. "Not yet." They stared at each other for an uncomfortably long period.

"No matter!" she shattered the silence with a grand, devil-may-care wave of her arms. "Thank you for your visit, Bob. I certainly hope it won't be the last."

"Uh, yes, it was nice to meet you as well. Take care." Bob tried not to run as he headed for the exit.

That was a few years ago, and their relationship had evolved since then. At first, Bob was able to avoid Madame Leroux and her store, but he did run into her every now and then as he was locking up. Their interaction was usually "How are the cards treating you today, Bob?" Or "Are your stars aligned today, watchmaker?" Or his favorite: "Your aura is a bit dim today, Bob. Be careful!"

Bob slowly opened the door and walked outside, trying to keep the bells from ringing. No sign of *The Madame*, as he used to call her. Feeling relieved, he got in his car and headed for the hospital.

Chapter 2

Bob drove down Delaware Street and took a right on Fourth. After a block, he passed what had years before been the Village Square restaurant, but was now a Thai place that he had never been in. It had been around a while so it couldn't have been too bad. The Village Square was a favorite of Bob's wife, Carol. He liked it too.

Bob had met his wife in college, on a blind date. When he told people this, it always sounded like a bad cliché, but it had actually happened that way. A mutual friend—Bob's friend, mostly—had set them up based on one thing they had in common: neither drank alcohol. In Carol's sorority that was odd—at least odd enough for Bob's friend to make the connection.

Their first official date was at a sorority dance, although they did get together informally before that to get to know each other a bit. Bob had a reasonably good time at the dance, and it seemed like Carol did too, so he asked her out that night for another date. She said yes, and before either knew it they were seeing each other regularly and exclusively. Soon Bob met Carol's parents, and they seemed to like him. He was a couple years older than Carol and about to graduate and be commissioned into the Army. He knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, so he proposed right before he graduated, and she said yes. Doing this while she was still in school also allowed her to have the coveted "Ring Ceremony" at her sorority, where the sisters announced their engagements. Bob found out a bit later that Carol's parents weren't exactly thrilled with her marrying into the Army, but were somewhat assuaged by a husband with a steady career, so in the end they were supportive.

The wedding was intimate and beautiful, and the honeymoon was brief. Bob didn't have much leave saved up, and had to get back for field training exercises anyway. The couple had planned on living together at Fort Lewis, Washington, Bob's first duty station, following their marriage. Unexpectedly, Bob's unit was deactivated (this was the shrinking Army of the nineties), and he had to go look for another position. He found one, with a unit that was being moved to Fort Polk, Louisiana. Needless to say, this disappointed both Bob and Carol. They had loved Washington (Carol had visited Bob a few times before they were married), and neither had ever been anywhere close to Louisiana. They were aware of the stereotypes, however, and hoped what they heard was greatly exaggerated.

The wedding followed the unit's move, so Bob had set up their household on his own. He found a nice two-bedroom apartment in a place called Green Acres Plaza in DeRidder, about 15 miles from post. On his first visit to the local Walmart, he was a bit shocked to find bait and turkey calls in the

checkout line where the gum usually is, and the woman in front of him having her check filled out by the cashier—for what reason he could only imagine.

The apartment was furnished a bit haphazardly. In the living room was a burnt-orange couch and 1970s coffee table courtesy of the Salvation Army Store, and a particle board entertainment center purchased at the PX. Bob didn't own a TV before the wedding, so the entertainment center held books. There were also two vintage chairs that Bob got from his brother. In the attached dining room was a really nice wooden card table and chairs that Carol had bought for Bob's Washington apartment on one of her visits. There were also some basic homemade bookshelves that would have received a C- in a high school woodshop class. They held books though, which was all Bob cared about. One bedroom was an office, which held a desk and Bob's stereo and record collection. The other bedroom had a queen bed with no headboard, Bob's childhood dresser, and a plant stand as a side table. They definitely weren't rich, but they were happy.

So began Carol's introduction to Army life. While the peacekeeping deployment rotations of the mid- to late-nineties hadn't yet begun, Bob's unit was very busy making sure they were ready if the call ever came. He usually left the house at 5:00 am and usually didn't return until between five and six in the evening. Soon Carol found a rewarding job on post, which helped fill some of the time. Fortunately, Bob's unit had a great Officers' Wives group that met frequently, and Carol quickly made some good friends. The group could be a bit nuts, too, as evidenced by one of the early outings Carol experienced. The ladies were headed to an overnight retreat at Toledo Bend, and they had a scavenger hunt competition on the way there, giving each car a list of things to find along the route. One item was roadkill. Most cars either decided it was a joke or that they didn't want to win that badly. Carol was a bit surprised upon arrival to find a dead armadillo in a garbage bag tied to the roof of the car carrying the Regimental Commander's wife. Apparently some of the ladies were as competitive as their husbands.

As they were young and in love, the couple made the most of the time they spent together. Sometimes they would meet after work and go to the on-post movie theater. Bob intentionally didn't tell Carol that, before the movie, the theater showed a patriotic short and played the *Star-Spangled Banner*, and that everyone was expected to stand. The look on her face was priceless! This practice led to some other unusual events. One night following a movie, they piled into Bob's car and went home, forgetting they had driven separately. The next morning, for at least two minutes, Bob thought his wife's car had been stolen, until they both realized what had happened. Another night Bob thought it would be funny to race past Carol once they turned onto the highway that connected DeRidder and Fort Polk. The

Highway Patrolman hiding in the median didn't seem amused as Bob flew past him, not noticing the trooper in the darkness in time to slow down.

They would often go to local restaurants, Charlie's being their favorite. The area was lacking in chain restaurants that weren't fast food. On many weekends they would escape to the Hilton hotel in Beaumont, Texas, and spend the weekend in "civilization." Their last stay at this particular Hilton was a memorable one. It was Friday the 13th, and the first thing Bob and Carol discovered was that the military discount they had been used to receiving had been discontinued. The first room they were given was occupied...fortunately they didn't walk in on anything that couldn't be "unseen," but it was a shock, nonetheless. As if that weren't enough, the fire alarm went off at about two in the morning. The signs were pretty clear the hotel no longer wanted their business.

The couple's Fort Polk experience included Bob's 5-month deployment to Haiti as part of Operation Uphold Democracy. He worried about Carol being by herself, so much so that he got her an early version of a cell phone to keep in the car. It was huge, in a bag, with a wired, magnetic antenna for the roof. Fortunately, she never had to use it. This was one of the first deployments where keeping in touch with loved ones was easier than in years past. Bob got to call Carol nearly every morning via the Defense Switching Network, or DSN, morale call line. Even though it was only five minutes, it was nice to hear her voice every day. Not everyone got to do this as regularly as Bob did, but as he worked in the headquarters building and was one of the first people in at 6:00 am he figured calling at this time wasn't preventing anyone else from using the line. Email had also just appeared in Bob's unit, and they set it up down in Haiti as well, so he could send Carol email messages through the Headquarters Company back at Polk that she could pick up. They didn't yet have email at home. They also got to do a monthly video teleconference, so it was nice for them to see each other.

A few months after the deployment, it was off to Fort Bliss, Texas, for schooling. It was during this period that Bob and Carol tried to get pregnant, but it never happened. Instead of testing and treatments, they decided it just wasn't meant to be, and that was that. Bob's career progressed, and Carol followed him around the country and the world working and pursuing an advanced degree whenever and wherever she could. Assignments in Germany, New York, Kansas, and Hawaii, and deployments to Bosnia and Iraq came and went, and after 21 years, they decided it was time to do something else. They settled in Leavenworth, Kansas, a place where they had been stationed twice, and bought their first home. Carol landed an adjunct professor job at St. Mary University, and Bob went to watchmaking school in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. It was a two-year program, but he was able to come home

at least two weekends a month as well as during vacations and the summer break. He was able to use the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill to pay for it, which helped make the decision to do it a bit more palatable.

He graduated, passed his AWCI certification test, and set up shop in downtown Leavenworth. Business wasn't bad, as he had a regular influx of potential clients each year when the new Command and General Staff College students arrived in late July. There was a fairly decent segment of the officer corps that liked higher-end watches, so Bob made sure that every year he had a table at the information fair the school held at the start of the course. Many folks didn't realize that, just like a car, a watch needed regular servicing to keep functioning properly year after year. Bob stressed to the students (or, more often, their spouses) that while they were at school was a perfect time to get this done—especially those whose watches had been through a deployment in Iraq or Afghanistan.

That was five years ago now. He and Carol were both happy in their work, and life was good. The first bump along this smooth road was the sudden death of Carol's mother. The second bump neither of them expected.

It was about two years after Bob opened his shop that the call came.