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**THE HOLOCAUST ENGINE**

**The Holocaust Engine - Book 1**

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## [THE HOLOCAUST ENGINE](#)

Book 1: *The Holocaust Engine*

Book 2: *Fluid Shock* [Coming Late 2020 or Early 2021]

Book 3: *Unda Sanguis: The Flood* [Coming Late 2021]

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Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Books by David Rike & Stephen Patrick](#)

[BONUS CONTENT](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Dedication](#)

[THE HOLOCAUST ENGINE](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[PART 1](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[PART 2](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Special Sneak Preview: FLUID SHOCK by David Rike & Stephen Patrick](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[More from Evolved Publishing](#)

[Special Sneak Preview: RED DEATH by Jeff Altabef](#)

Dedication

*David:
To My Father.*

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*Stephen:  
To my family, who taught me to find my paradise in people, not places.*

# The **HOLOCAUST** **ENGINE**



**“The Holocaust Engine” - Book 1**

**David Rike**  
**Stephen Patrick**

# PROLOGUE

When Wesley Bontrager died, the press reported only that the professional quarterback had committed suicide in the infirmary at the Metro West Detention Center while awaiting arraignment for the murder of his friend and teammate, George Coles. What they did not say was that Bontrager also tore through his wrist and ankle restraints, killed a guard and the nurse who was trying to sedate him, and then, as the jailors watched from the control room, battered the steel door with his fists, his shoulder, and finally his own head until he fractured his skull with a series of convulsive collisions.

After storming the room, the response team found Bontrager – only three months removed from starting the last four games of the previous season – dead of a massive hemorrhage.

During an interview, his mother said, “I blame his coaches and them no good coeds. Me and Mr. Bontrager did not raise him that way. That’s for sure.”

His father, stolid and immovable, brought up the statements concerning his son’s symptoms and erratic behavior. “The boy was sick. He just needed help.”

Four days later, practice stopped after defensive end Tony Shivers – already sidelined with an undisclosed condition – began screaming and suddenly turned catatonic. Blood results tested negative for narcotics. The following Saturday, as every player on the team was undergoing a battery of tests, one of the team’s trainers walked into his neighbor’s backyard, pull-started a rusty lawnmower, turned it on its side, and dove head first into the spinning blades. When they arrived, the medical examiners came in HAZMAT suits.

Bontrager’s Disease was about to take its place amongst the pantheon of history’s most deadly diseases.

Only one of the major news outlets came close to discovering the truth before it was too late. They’d been looking for Bontrager’s girlfriend, Theresa Bettencourt, assumed dead, but at the time still only missing. Three weeks before multiple Tasers had aided in effecting Wesley Bontrager’s arrest, Theresa Bettencourt had called 911, while the couple vacationed in Key West, to report a welfare concern .

Plenty of locals remembered seeing or speaking to them. Wesley had done what he always did: he’d made friends. He looked nothing like a pro quarterback, they all agreed; 6’2”, 240 pounds of smiling cheeks and baby fat. Wesley had been born on a farm north of Scranton to a family of Pennsylvania Dutch. He’d been blessed with a self-effacing sense of humor that let him in on all the jokes about his girth. Whenever anyone called him by his nickname, “Fat Ninja,” he struck his signature crouch. Bontrager had fit right in on an island of eccentrics.

The story had the two of them eating lunch oysters at The Raw Bar when a pair of Cuban brothers interrupted them with free drinks. It was the least they could do, they explained through thick accents, since they had won four hundred bucks when Wes threw for 278 yards and 3 TDs in the Dolphins’ win over the Colts. A few beers later and they were no longer strangers, they were *buds*, just like his teammates and his coaches and even a few of his opponents.

These buds rented Sea-Doos to tourists and begged their new friend to go out on the water while they took a few photographs for their kiosk. Of course, he would. Why not?

They walked together down to the house boat where the two brothers lived, and where waiting patrons could normally sit on chairs or on the gunwales, but where on this day a handwritten *Out of Order* sign hung from a chain across the walkway.

Wesley rocketed out with one of them. The other one, obviously uncomfortable with Theresa standing so close to the ramp, told her three times with simple English and hand gestures to wait right here. Then he started another watercraft, looked back and smiled one last time. *Right here.* And he sped off to take the soon-to-be-autographed action shots.

When he was out of sight, Theresa stood up, slid under the chain, and strode up to the boat. For the last several minutes, at odd intervals, she'd been hearing a soft scraping sound coming from inside, and at one point, she even though she heard a barely audible sound that might have been moaning—a little girl's moaning. The outer door was locked, but Theresa had decided to investigate and, as with all her decisions, once her mind was made up, the rest was simply details. After a few jiggles, then finally a sharp lift, the rickety door opened.

According to the police report, once inside the galley, she could hear the sound much more clearly, so she walked through a combination of living room and office, and into another room that she described as smelling sharply of "moldy wet garbage." Inside this room, against the near wall, sat a desk with a thick kitchen knife embedded into a cutting board. All around the knife were leaves, roots, and the remains of a chicken: wings, feathers, entrails, even a beak that pointed up at the low ceiling, each of these smattered with blood. Near the edges of the countertop, forming a triangle, were three votive candles that had burned until the wax puddled at the bottoms.

And then there was the girl.

She lay on a trundle, tied down with ropes wrapped in bath towels—Hispanic, maybe fourteen, but no more than sixteen. Her skin was pale, her lips discolored, her eyes red. She hardly took notice of Theresa, craning her neck to the desk and a cockroach the size of a toddler's hand that scuttled up one of the legs. She breathed out sounds that might have been an attempt at speech. In between the noises, her breath came and went in shallow gulps. Anyone else might have recognized that the girl was sick, but Theresa Bettencourt was not anyone else.

She was not even Theresa Bettencourt.



Long before she invented her persona of sophistication and cool indifference, she was Terri Chalmers. Terri... with an "i."

She'd not been born to a family of comfortable wealth, and did not have a cousin who was an actress, or a grandfather who was an English Peer, and contrary to what she told her boyfriends if they ever asked, she had not lost her virginity at the age of seventeen. She'd lost it at the age of nine, after the woman who'd given her birth—fresh out of rehab—had decided to take a turn at playing mother and snatched her away from the care of her grandparents. By the time Omaha, Nebraska Protective Services finally removed little Terri the next year, she had suffered one broken arm, one fractured rib, one cracked pelvis, two broken fingers, and one sexually transmitted disease; all of this at the hands of her mother's meth-addicted boyfriend. The man would never stand trial for any of it, dying only a few months later riding his motorcycle with a blood alcohol content of .16.

Social workers had brought back a very different Terri Chalmers. This Terri had trouble making friends and got suspended at school. This Terri rarely slept through the night. This Terri



trusted no one.

At eighteen, she took her first job as a dancer at a men's club. The manager and the other girls trained her. They helped her develop her signature look – short dark hair, bright red lipstick, movements like a jaguar coming out of its tree.

Four years of college, and a string of adult videos under the name of Theresa Nightingale later, and the sobbing little girl in the county emergency room had fully transformed into Theresa Bettencourt: sensual, flirtatious, yet somehow still refined. Theresa Bettencourt: the object of every man's desire.

When introduced at a Miami nightclub, she had collected Wesley as easily as if she had bought him at the grocery store along with a carton of milk. A week later, she called a real estate mogul at his Tampa office and told him she was moving out of his beach house. The affair had been a mistake and she could no longer live with the shame.

She didn't love Wesley, of course, any more than she loved any of them. She never fantasized about walking down the aisle or living happily ever after. When she thought of Wesley at all, she imagined a messy divorce and a tell-all memoir for whatever ordeal she would one day decide as having best described their relationship.

*Wesley Bontrager, the Athlete America Thought We Knew.*

Theresa Bettencourt, a master of manipulation, was an expert at cultivating her own image. This was her, and this was the world she thought she knew. She didn't know Caribbean folk medicine, however, and she certainly didn't know that some girls needed more than the intrepid protagonist of someone's imagined storyline.



When she looked down at the girl, and the trundle that scraped the floor with each of the girl's epileptic movements, Theresa Bettencourt did not see that two brothers had smuggled their niece in from Cuba and were doing what they could after the local hospital had already discharged her, offering nothing more than a prescription and a referral to a specialist on the mainland. Theresa saw a victim. She saw a slave being forced to service her captors. The nervous ticks grew from trauma, and the mouth, as if she drank grape juice through puckered lips, had surely resulted from whatever these two animals had forced into her.

As she waited for police, she cut the ropes with the heavy knife and tried to make the girl more presentable. The young woman only stared up at her rescuer, but Theresa rubbed at the stains around her mouth, first with the sleeve of her blouse, then with a moistened finger. It would all make a fine chapter in her book.

Police arrested both brothers at the scene, but they were never charged, because the police never got a statement from the girl. In fact, they never even learned her name.

They checked her in at the hospital the same day. A social worker had started taking notes, but when she couldn't get the girl to speak, she walked down the hall to call her supervisor.

The doctor, thinking that he recognized her, went upstairs to ask a colleague if this was the same girl from last week. When they went back to the room, she was gone.

They never sew her alive again.

She'd wandered out the doors, through the parking lot, and onto College Street. The first two cars had swerved. The third stopped.

Three men got out of an old Suburban, and thinking that she was stoned, muttered to each other at their luck, and took the girl back to their conch cabin on the south end of Stock Island.

She did not resist. She never said a word, and made no move to defend herself when the room full of men began raping her.

By the end of the night, patient zero had infected patients one through nine.

# PART 1

Babylon was a gold cup in the Lord's hand;  
She made the whole earth drunk.  
The nations drank her wine;  
Therefore, they have now gone mad.  
*Jeremiah 51:7*

# CHAPTER 1

## The Suck-Up

### Northeast End of the Marquesas, Gulf of Mexico

The vacation was over. He'd been looking forward to it for weeks, and now it was totally and utterly ruined – and with a little luck, it would stay that way.

Charles Stratton leaned back in the pilot chair of his fifty-foot flybridge, *Bull Run*, adjusted his Polo shirt and his Bermuda shorts for comfort, and restarted the engine.

On the deck below, his wife Mary shouted, "Have you called the Coast Guard yet?"

"I'm going to move the boat around first."

"I'm worried, Charley."

He throttled up and muttered to himself, "And aren't we all surprised."

On Monday, they'd sailed out of Naples, down the gulf shore of Florida, and into the narrow channels and shoals of the Marquesas. They'd spent two days of glorious fishing in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, with time and supplies for two more. Now, everything lay on the verge of ruin. Glorious ruin.

"Charley, should we –"

"They're fine," he bellowed, and throttled up a little more. "Jesus."

As they cleared the mangrove branches on the south tip of the tiny coral atoll, a second boat came into view. The name on the back read, *Scuttlebutt*, an old thirty-foot Maverick. Next to the boat, standing knee high in gulf water, his bikini-clad daughter, Krissy, a freshman at the University of Florida, waved, holding a snorkel and a mask against her short blonde hair with her other hand.

"See."

Krissy postured as if posing for a camera, this girl who'd chosen her college based on sorority sisters and tan lines. She had her mother's looks – all but her facial expressions. Krissy had never worked a day in her life, and she pursed her lips at the world full of people who did, looking on everything that was not designer apparel with a bland sort of suspicion.

Her boyfriend, Reagan Castaneda, hailed them from the aft deck of the derelict craft.

They'd been on the cleft side of the island all morning, fishing in the clear water. Then, after a tasteless lunch of minestrone and pasta salad, Charles had applied a bit of SPF 15 to his face, hiked up his shorts, and tramped onto the spit of sand that formed a few narrow feet of beach while the kids snorkeled. Like most of the Marquesas, the tiny island was hardly suited to a walking tour, having barely any sand, instead nearly surrounded by rocks and tree roots. But he needed space – desperately – from his *crew*, so he'd disturbed tree after tree of frigate birds on his stroll to the island's edge. The little ribbon of beach ended, and Charles had held his sandals while splashing through the cool water, feeling his way over the rocks next to the jutting mangroves as he rounded the southern tip.

He knew the boat was empty as soon as he saw it – no one visible, mangroves rubbing against the fiberglass hull with every wave, algae building at the waterline. He went back and

told the others, and they came to see the funny sight for themselves.

Krissy's boyfriend had investigated first. Listing a few degrees to port, the boat had the feel of something violated and ominous. Still, the senseless boy had flopped over the gunwale and went through the ship like a child diving into a ball pit.

He was supposed to be Krissy's big catch—Reagan Castaneda, senior, Sigma Phi. The girls in Krissy's sorority made him out to be some sort of great white whale—tall, handsome, good grades, whatever passed for cool to the tweeting generation—but after three days together on the yacht, Charles was ready for his daughter to take her fill of couple-selfies and throw this one back into the sea.

He was no more empty-headed than Krissy, but the boy was something that Charles Stratton hated—a yes man. He was Smithers in search of his Mr. Burns. Everything was “sweet,” his all-purpose term of abject acceptance. Every sip of lemonade and unsweetened tea; every morsel of Mary's pasta salad, chicken salad, bean salad, and plain old garden salad; every sandwich and bland casserole the woman forked onto his plate—it was all *sweet*. In fact, everything his matronly creature of a wife did seemed just dandy to the Castaneda boy, who'd obviously come from the ‘win the mother, get the daughter’ school of womanizing.

*Just another family disappointment. And really, what's one more at this point?*

With his name—*now that certainly speaks of conservative parenting*—his choice of fraternity houses, and his major in business, it had seemed for all the world as if he might have had potential—someone else to answer the phone the next time Krissy wrecked her car.

Now, Charles's initial hopes were sliding down reality's drain. Three more years and Krissy would likely move back in. Heaven help her if she thought someone like this was coming along for the ride.

Reagan had his mysteries, Charles had to admit. For one, he'd never taken his shirt off in three days at sea, almost always wearing a white, button-down, long-sleeve shirt and a pair of khaki shorts, which made him look like a calypso dancer. For a second, during the previous day's fishing, when the inexperienced boy had stripped too much line with a big tarpon and the fish had taken advantage and cut right under the boat, Charles had jumped up with his pocket knife to cut the line before it caught in the propeller blades. The boy had startled at the sudden appearance of the knife, and for a crazed second, Castaneda had swiveled his whole body as if he were about to kick his girlfriend's father squarely in the knee. He had spent the next ten minutes making it into a joke.

Nonetheless, given everything else Charles had learned of him, these were certain to have mundane explanations. The shirt fetish, like the black swim shirt he was wearing at the moment over his obviously athletic frame—again long-sleeved—probably covered some ridiculous tattoo. The knife paranoia most likely arose from a childhood spent with an alcoholic father and the drama of the macho culture of Mexicans or Italians or whatever he was.

A flock of nesting birds flushed at the approaching motor, as Charles deftly pulled his boat so that the starboard bow nearly touched the *Scuttlebutt's* stern. Thirty feet from shore, the draught showed a safe depth.

“Are you going to call?” his wife asked, still anxious to contact the Coast Guard.

“In a sec.” He took a flashlight from the galley, moved to the edge, and said to Castaneda, “Permission to come aboard.”

The boy clowned a salute.

“You find anything?”

“It's registered out of Key West. I found a name: Carson Stovall?” The boy looked up, his almost girlishly long eye lashes forming a question.

"The name means nothing to me, if you're wondering if I know him from the great fraternity of fishing captains."

"What do you think happened?"

"I think he lost his boat," Krissy quipped.

Charles smelled a hint of fish. The aft deck had a pair of mounted swivel chairs. Beneath the port gunwale hung a trio of fine Apex rods mounted on hooks. He opened a cooler next to the chair, and found beer cans floating in warm water.

"Stovall's a man after my own heart," he said. "Nice little fishing rig he had here."

"It kind of looks like the boat from Jaws."

Charles looked into Castaneda's vacuous grin. The entire Facebook generation was just noxious. "I don't think a shark got him, Kiddo. If he was an old retired codger, he might have had a heart attack or something."

"And fallen overboard?"

Not the most likely scenario, Charles had to admit. Still, it beat the ravenous shark off the coast of Florida theory. He stepped into the galley and ran a hand over a fake wood-grained countertop. The boat was certainly well-ordered, with no sign of a fight; just a ship left for days in the gulf. On the wall hung several pictures, most of them involving a white-haired man in his sixties, usually shirtless, his prominent belly flaring for all to see. In one picture, he held up an enormous parrotfish; in another, a jack. In another, he and a fellow senior citizen held up a whole line of gray snappers. Charles felt a kinship with the smiles he saw in the photos. This boat had been Stovall's escape from the mad world – untie the rope, power up the motor, and head out into the shallow waters with a friend or all alone.

*Lucky bastard. Well, not so lucky anymore.*

Bad heart or sharks, Charles had the unsettling realization that this Carson Stovall, whoever he had been, was now most certainly dead. No true angler would let his boat just drift away from port. Floating all the way from Key West? Not a chance. This man had died – the only logical explanation – and he never got off a distress call.

"Who knows," said Charles, trying not to give away the cold shiver running up his arms. "I'm going to call this in before Mary pops a blood vessel."

"Can I listen?" Castaneda said.

"To what?"

"Radioing the Coast Guard."

"It's not 1976, Reagan. I'm just going to call them on my cell," he said, a bit incredulous. Then, to himself, "But if you want to stand there while I do it..."

He hopped back over to the *Bull Run*.

Mary held her pullover tightly around the collar. His wife of nearly two decades would turn forty this summer. With the hair that she refused to allow anywhere near the seawater, and a trim figure that she kept away from direct sunlight, she could have passed for early thirties. Not that she maintained any kind of youthful vitality – more like she was perfectly preserved. Mary Stratton lived the leisurely life of a kept woman, a life she hardly appreciated. What did she care what her husband needed from her? Not his Mary; always trying to play the part of the supportive spouse, but never actually supporting. The few times she'd hosted events for Stratton's coworkers had been an embarrassment, as her Tennessee Baptist rattled obnoxiously against the New York socialites the other executives had married.

"You don't think it could have been pirates," she said. "Or smugglers, or something like that?"

"No! I don't think –"

"I was thinking a shark might have got him when he jumped in for a swim," Castaneda said, to which Mary's eyes popped and her head bobbed.

Charles shook his head and pulled out his phone, the sensation of foreboding gone, the feeling of annoyance now fully returned. He'd never been so eager to get off the water. A plan took shape in his thoughts: an added day on their reservation at the Casa Marina; a stomach ache or just plain old request for an afternoon at the hotel; Mary and Krissy dragging the boy on one of their shopping runs, leaving him alone with the private beach and the pool-side bar.

"Mary," he said without looking. "You haven't done anything with tonight's reservation, have you?"

"No."

"Why don't we make it an extra day? You guys can root around the island tomorrow. I'll make some inquiries. Give us a little time to make sure it's safe before we head back to Naples."

"You don't mind?"

He offered a noncommittal shrug. "It's probably best."

The harried woman on the phone asked him a quarter hour's worth of questions. They were going to send a search craft as soon as possible.

*As soon as possible? Good Lord! What else do they have to do?*

She asked if they'd be waiting with the derelict.

*Of course not! If you had any idea what I'm putting up with.... By the time your people arrive, I'll be begging to join Stovall, no matter what happened to him.*

They were already in route to the Keys before he disconnected.

The setting sun had turned the water from tropical bright to pastel blue. A group of flying fish skipped across the waves, out of the *Bull Run's* powerful wake. They'd been planning to spend the night on the island from the start. They needed gas, and Mary always wanted a day to stretch her legs. The plan had been Friday on the Keys, Saturday back in the gulf waters, head for port on Sunday, close up the beach house, say goodbye to the kids – maybe have a talk with Krissy about her choice in men – then fly back to Connecticut. He'd be back to work on Tuesday.

Now they could all stretch their legs for an extra day. He'd caught a couple of nice fish – a barracuda, and a twenty-two-pound permit that he half considered keeping as a mantelpiece. Now all he wanted was a shot of Crown and an empty bar stool on either side.

Castaneda perked up. "Is that Key West?"

*Right on queue.*

Castaneda climbed up to the flybridge and took the empty seat, dressed again in white and khaki, leaving the girls on their devices down in the galley.

"That's it," Charles answered, nodding toward the smudge of land and buildings still very much in the distance. "Is this your first time?"

"Oh, no, I've been here more than once with my family."

"Well, now you'll get a couple days with my family. Maybe you can show the girls some of your favorite spots."

"Sweet."

Charles sighed. "Yeah."

Key West wasn't exactly what Charles Stratton would consider "sweet." He was just old enough to remember a time when the island still had an air of "dropped out counterculture" – a beatnik mystique. Then it learned how to package that mystique and sell it at a premium. Now, Key West was a tiny island thoroughly overrun by tourists all looking for something that had not existed in forty years. It was still a haven for nonconformists, but Charles had found that if

you took too many of the strange and poured them all into the same tiny little sausage skin of habitation, what you were left with looked like a set piece arranged for some sappy network TV show.

"Have you started your job hunt?" he asked.

Castaneda offered a weak shrug. "I've been to a couple of fairs."

"You'd better get on it. They don't grow on trees anymore."

Charles had assumed that he would be fending off a mongrel begging for scraps the entire trip. He'd half wondered if his relationship to Krissy was a pretext for getting a 'foot in the door' at Charles's company. Castaneda was a business major set to graduate in a month and a half, and Charles Stratton the chief financial officer at Satterwhite Investments. But again, no. The boy didn't even have enough ambition to sniff at an opportunity when it plopped down right in front of his nose.

"I thought I might take a little time off."

"Of course." Charles took a deep breath.

*Pathetic. Is there even a point in trying to instill a few shreds of wisdom?*

"Take a break," Charles shouted over the motor and rushing wind. "See the world. Listen, the business field doesn't run like an artist commune, Reagan. An employer is going to want to see some drive, some desire. You've got to establish your credibility right from the very beginning. Show them that you're somebody who will put in the work, somebody who can work with others." *Somebody who isn't such a God damned suck-up.* "Those first years are the most important. Even if your first job isn't a dream.... Hey, are you listening?"

The boy pointed in the direction of his glassy stare and mouthed something as if they were inside the galley.

"What?"

"I said, does *that* look right to you?"

As they rounded the harbor side of the island, nearing Garrison Bight, now dark, the shore looked normal to the casual eye. And Charles nearly said so. Nearly. But something *was* wrong. He felt it. Part of his mind told him that he was letting the abandoned boat, and his nervous shipmates, get the best of him. Whatever happened to Stovall was twenty miles away. Yet something else told him to take his time, to steady himself, to look close and find the puzzle piece that was jarringly out of place.

"Okay," he whispered to himself. "Where the hell is everybody?"

It wasn't quite deserted. Three hundred yards or so away, while running parallel to the shore, he could make out the shapes of people. But this was a Friday night, and Spring Break for some. Even without a cruise liner in the harbor, the numbers looked wrong.

*Seriously wrong.*

As they closed the distance, they passed the Pier House, and he couldn't see a single soul out on the deck. He saw only one person, maybe a waiter doing something on the patio and heading back inside. Every table should have been full, with more lined up at the rail feeding the fish under the lights.

The two men looked a question at each other, and Charles felt his heart beginning to beat with an odd force.

"Mary. Mare!" Her head appeared below. "Pull up the local news. Tell me if anything strange is going on."

"Our connections are real bad," she said, "but I'll try. What do you mean, 'strange'?"

"I don't know."

As the boat powered slowly into Garrison Bight, he looked around. The lighting was

normal, cars sat in the parking lot, boats in the slips – less than usual, but otherwise normal.

*Maybe.*

Someone close was playing their rock music loud enough to be heard over the motor. Behind that, from farther away, he could hear some sort of static, like voices from a crowd at a rock concert.

“Strange.”

Charles pulled up before Charterboat Row and lined up the back of the *Bull Run* with the open berth. Just as he started backwards, a little dingy appeared. A single occupant, holding the outboard motor’s tiller, steered his boat directly into Charles’ slip.

With a flash of anger, his tension vanished. “I don’t believe this.”

Castaneda looked at him and shrugged. “You want to just pull into another?” He glared at the spineless boy, then to the man climbing out of the dingy, and yelled, “Hey. Hey, Jackass! Can you not see me back here?” He let momentum carry the boat to the pier, right at the edge of the slip, then he slid down the ladder handrails and jumped onto the wooden planks.

The man, short, late twenties, wearing jeans and some band’s concert shirt, turned his head of sloppy, mangy hair from side to side while looking down, as if he had lost his keys.

“I’m talking to you, fella,” Charles said while approaching.

“Mr. Stratton,” Castaneda called out, “why don’t you wait a second?”

Charles could hear him telling the girls to go back inside the galley.

He was five feet away when he really saw the man’s face. The fluorescent lights from the slip’s open-air doorway showed eyes that looked frightened, and lips, oddly purple, cracked and swollen.

Hesitation crept into Charles Stratton’s voice. “I know you... saw me coming in...”

The man’s head was twitching. He looked on the verge of panic. Then, he suddenly looked up.

*Those eyes. Those crazed, bloodshot, empty eyes.*

An unexpected explosion of movement, and the figure burst forward. No time to react. No time to even think.

Charles was suddenly clinching to ward off a flurry of blows. “Stop!” He felt a stinging on his arms and shoulders. Indignation gave way to fear, as the realization struck that he would have to do something to defend himself. With his arms inside the flailing attacker, he pushed a hand into the man’s face, his thumbs searching for an eyeball.

*Something to cause pain. Something to make him stop. Up the cheek, against closed lids.*

With hands still windmilling around him, he yelled again. “Stop! God damn it!”

Just then, a cold pricking sensation started in his side and ran right to the center of his chest, and the dark sky turned suddenly light. His back slapped against wooden planks, and his head thumped. He looked up, staring at the wild-eyed assailant that now had his mouth open as if he were growling, his face, and the scaling knife he held in his right hand, poised at something farther down the pier.

*Have I been stabbed?*

Then another explosion of movement came, this one white and khaki, and two men crashed onto the planks.

Charles found his vision could not resolve anything more than a swirl of shapes and colors. He heard no sound.

And then he did. The ambient light faded. The sight in front of him resolved into an image of the Castaneda boy lying on top of the knife-wielding lunatic. The wild man flailed his head from side to side, but Castaneda had pinned one of his arms across the man’s body. Then



Charles saw the knife.

Castaneda had it... in his free hand... poised above the crazed man's face as if he were spear fishing and waiting for his prey to hold still just long enough to.... When he moved, he did so with machine-like precision, driving the blade deep into the other man's eye socket.

Charles heard a sucking sound over his own fevered breathing, like a foot stepping into mud. *A scream like a dog's yelp.* Charles's eyes went wide.

With the blade halfway in, Castaneda set his jawbone into the butt of the handle and added the weight of his head to the quivering thrust. The knife moved again, forcing its way slowly down, all the way, into the twitching skull. Blood streamed down the dead man's face.

Of everything Charles Stratton had seen on this day, his daughter's brainless boyfriend knifing a madman with the cool precision of a contract killer easily counted as the most bizarre.

"Ms. Stratton!" the Castaneda thing called out, coming up onto his knees so that his body covered his victim's head. "Call 911! Charles is hurt. We need an ambulance. Krissy. Krissy! I need that towel, the one on the chair. Throw me the towel."

Charles Stratton did not see a young man coming into his own right before his eyes. He saw a completely different human being than the one that had been agreeably grinning at him these last three days. The towel dropped nearby, and Charles watched as Reagan leaned over to pick it up, still hunched over the madman's ruined face. At this moment, Charles didn't know what the boy planned to do to him with the towel. Would he use it to staunch the bleeding, or did he intend to smother him? Was this what he did to witnesses? Either way, his body started to register pain, and although he couldn't speak or make coordinated movements, a tremor had seized his extremities, and he now shook as if he were being electrocuted. Still, he could not look away from Castaneda.

Then Charles saw why Reagan had wanted the towel. It had nothing to do with him. Reagan took the dead man's head in the crook of his arm and used the towel to cover his face. It first stood atop the knife like a little tent with a huge center support. Then he turned the dead man's skull to the right, set it back down, and tucked the cloth in on both sides of the man's shoulders. If the girls had not seen the killing as it occurred, they would have no idea what Castaneda had just done.

"I can't get through," Mary screamed hysterically. "It says all the lines are busy."

"Keep trying!" Castaneda yelled.

"What happened," Krissy cried.

*I got stabbed in the chest by some psychopath, and your frat boy/mob enforcer boyfriend just rammed the knife into his skull.*

"Your dad's been stabbed."

"Oh God."

He could see Krissy now, hunched over on the dock as if she'd been punched, shouting, "Daddy, Daddy!"

Reagan turned her back toward the boat. "Get your mom. Right now!"

Charles tried to speak when the boy came for him, but the best he could manage was a barely audible stream of mush. When Reagan looked him up and down, Charles would have cringed in anticipation if he could. Then Reagan hurriedly removed his shirt, took the collar in his teeth, and used both arms to tear it into strips. Charles didn't see any tattoos. If anything, the body now wrapping cloth strips around his arm and tying them off looked like the after-picture of some torturous workout system's advertisement page.

"You're breathing too fast." Reagan's voice was pure intent — no passion, no emotion — like a doctor delivering the fact to a patient whose name he'd just read off a clipboard. "You gotta

slow it down, Stratton, or you're going to die. Think about Mary. Think about Krissy." The last of his shirt he wadded into a ball and pressed against his side, and Charles thought he might black out. "Think about holding your grandkid and the great story you're going get to tell all the other Wall Street drones at work." He turned his head and shouted, "Ms. Stratton!"

"I still can't get anything! What are we going to do?"

"What the hell?" Castaneda looked all around, taking in the surroundings. When he looked back down, his eyes flashed condescension. "You better hope this works."

The boy vanished, and Charles could no longer move his neck enough to turn and see what Reagan was doing. After a few seconds, he heard the jingle of keys and the beep of a car alarm. Then he reappeared, and Reagan lifted Charles in his arms like an oversized sack of dog food. He'd never imagined pain so intense.

"Ladies," Castaneda called out. "We are leaving."

"How?" Mary said.

"We're taking the other guy's car."

"Did you knock him out?" Krissy said. "What about the boat?"

"Now!" And then he moved.

They both moved – upstairs, onto pavement, every bounce sending shock waves of agony to his steadily unhinging brain.

"You just had to tell off the peasant, didn't you, Charles?" Reagan said. "Couldn't keep it together enough to realize that we just stepped into some kind of shit storm."

They stopped. Another beep, a moment's pause, and they were moving again.

"It's this one in the middle of the parking lot," Reagan called over his shoulder. "Krissy, I need you to open the back door and get in. I'm going to hand him to you."

They stopped again. Another pause.

"Krissy," a voice as cold as a knife sliding into an eye socket said. "Get in the car right now or your dad is going to die."

A whimper. A door opening. From far off in the distance came something that sounded like a woman screaming, but he couldn't be sure.

"Passenger seat, Mary." Reagan continued taking charge. "Knock all that stuff on the floorboard."

Charles Stratton's back slid across a car seat, his vision aimed up at his steely-eyed rescuer, then only at fabric and a dome light.

"His head on your lap. Hold it. Hold it!"

And there was Krissy, crying, her delicate chin quivering, terrified. Now a hand was pressing the clump of blood-soaked cloth against his ribs.

A door slammed, then another and another.

"Is that other man dead?" said Mary, sobbing.

"We'll worry about that later," Reagan said, and the car started. "Krissy, you've got to keep him from moving." They lurched forward. "I have to take some hard turns, but you gotta keep him as still as possible. Mary, pull up a map."

"I'm getting directions."

"I don't need directions! I need a map!" The car speed up and then slowed. "I never plotted alternate routes to the hospital by car. If we have to get off the main road, I need you to tell me where to turn."

*Plotted alternate routes to the hospital? What the hell does that mean? Strange. All so strange.*

Whatever it meant, it sounded good to Charles's ears. Reagan was not trying to kill him; that was clear. Charles was beginning to feel real affection for this young man, a pronounced

warmth in the center of his being, even as his arms and legs sizzled with the painful stings of nerve sleep. Guido the frat boy was trying to keep him alive – trying like the devil. The car sped up and turned hard enough to make the tires screech.

“Reagan!”

“I see it.”

A hard right, and Charles felt his mind starting to drift. He thought it might not be so bad to have a connected mobster in the family. A picture of his office, sitting behind his desk, Tom Barnett seated opposite, gradually materialized: *Tom, if you and your FTC cronies don't get out of my office right now, I'm going to make one God damned phone call and you can kiss your ass goodbye.*

*Nice.*

“Ms. Stratton.”

It didn't make sense. He still knew that much. Why would a mobster hide out in a state college?

“Ms. Stratton!”

“I know. I know. Left. Left here!”

But lots of things didn't make sense. That didn't mean they weren't real.

“Here. Here. Okay. The next. Another left. Here!”

His marriage, for example.... He'd been so hard on Mary. Why? What did she ever do to deserve it? She was four months pregnant at the wedding – with the only child she would ever be able to bear – and he'd always considered that she trapped him. So odd. Why had he ever thought that? He had practically forced himself on her.

“Oh my God!” Mary cried.

“What is happening?” Krissy sobbed.

“No time!” Reagan was still in charge.

They swerved right and back to the left. Straight now, and accelerating.

“Okay,” Mary said, forcing a small level of calm. “We're getting close.”

*Listen to her, Charles thought. All that emotion for me. Even seeing... whatever they were seeing. So frightened. Yet still fighting. Fighting for me.*

He was sorry, so sorry, for the pain he'd caused. Why had he ever thought any of it was important? The late nights, the socials, the affairs. *The affairs*, he thought with a kind of sorrowful laugh. Not just the one Mary knew about, but the dozen others she did not – Rachel at the office; Evelyn, whom he'd not seen since high school; the girl – *what was her name, Xiao Ling?* – and the rest of the little Taipei girls who were basically just another perk to anyone working in the Hong Kong office. None of it was important. *This* was important. Mary giving everything to keep him alive was important. He wanted to cry. He wanted to tell her that if he lived, it was all going to be different.

*Oh, Mary. Sweet Mary.*

“We're coming up to the channel,” Reagan said. “I don't know what this is going to be. Krissy, hold him tight.”

They sped up, faster and faster.

*What's he doing? Is he going to jump the channel? This is amazing.*

“Reagan!”

A hard right and then impact. Damage. Both sides. They were sliding. Scraping. Squeezing the car through... something. The girls screaming. Car horns. The scraping gone and then grass. Then gravel. Tires shrieking their way back onto hardtop road. A left, and then the throaty roar of an engine feeling its accelerator pedal pushed all the way to the floor. The wheel jerking them around another car horn.

"This is it," Mary managed through her tears – at least, it sounded like she was crying. She could barely speak.

*Oh, Mary, if I don't make it, stay close to Reagan. You and Krissy both. Stay close.*

One more right. Charles hardly felt it. A sudden stop. Doors opened. He was being lifted. Moved. He saw lights. Growing brighter, but only fragments of movement through his fluttering eyelids. Sliding doors moving apart?

"I've got a stabbing!" Reagan yelled. "Hey!"

"I can see that," a woman's voice. She sounded put out. "We're doing our best!"

*Oh, Lady, Charles thought as darkness closed in on him. You better watch your tone with this one.*

# CHAPTER 2

## A Paradox

### Lower Keys Medical Center, Stock Island

Since childhood, Reagan Castaneda had only broken character in public one time: college, freshman year. It was just a mumble, under the breath. He'd never even looked up at the professor droning on about the inherent patriotism of 'civil unrest.'

"You morons and your anarchy," he'd said. When he looked up, he was surrounded by staring faces... like now.

He stood shirtless in a waiting room and watched cable news for twenty minutes before he prepared to leave the hospital. His hair was still wet from the scrubbing he had given himself in the bathroom sink.

Key West was one of four locations covered by on-scene news crews—four cities, four riots. He gazed directly up, only a few feet away, when the feed switched over to Duval Street. A few seconds of bouncing footage appeared, people running in every direction on the narrow street.

A woman with a microphone said, "Mark, the third night of unrest since the police shooting of two unarmed bikers has been the most chaotic. So far, the heightened police presence has done nothing to calm the—" A series of loud bangs sent the camera into a frenzy. "Gunshots. I... I think we're hearing gunshots."

Then the screen went black.

Reagan shook his head and chuckled as, seated nearby, a mother and her young son watched him. "Riots on Key West," he said, his voice suddenly timid and uncertain. "Who would've guessed?"

The screen again showed the newsroom, and the anchorman promised an update as soon as the feed could be restored, but it never came. The rest of it was flashes of the rioting in Philadelphia, which had whole sections of the city ablaze, a few snippets from San Francisco and Memphis, and endless commentary on the nature of the most recent wave of protests. After a commercial break, the anchor assured viewers that every member of the news crew in Key West was alive and uninjured.

The ticker at the bottom of screen read:

*Violence in Key West, unconfirmed reports of dozens hurt.*

Reagan didn't need the news to know this. The hospital looked like a forward MASH unit overrun with wounded. He'd stood in the ER, the eye of the hurricane, holding Charles Stratton as the blood from his unconscious body dripped steadily onto the floor.

They'd found him a room... finally! Reagan had only slightly exaggerated the man's wealth and importance, and although the triage nurse had acted unimpressed, a few minutes later, they had their room.

Two doors down, a body lay on a gurney, covered in a sheet—the second he'd seen. Tonight, the dead had to wait.

Reagan made his way through a current of medical staff, running and fast walking, back to

the girls. Before they looked up, he crossed his arms tightly over his chest and let his face go slack.

"Hey, guys," he said. "Something is happening with the riots and stuff. The news showed us, but it was short, and it was all weird. I'm going to try and find out what's going on out there."

"They're working on him right now," Mary said flatly, and wiped at her dry cheeks. "They're working so hard." Her voice came slow and even.

Did she even hear a word I said?

It was as though she'd exhausted all capacity for emotion, and was now only acting on habit. Huddled in a hospital hallway, still wearing the black one-piece swimsuit and a flimsy pullover, she again wiped at tears that were not falling. Then she composed herself, and held out both arms, as if Reagan were a child and she were inviting him into her loving, motherly embrace.

Reagan's breath caught in his throat. *Does she know what I just did? Does she suspect what I really am? What's really going through my head?*

"Ms. Stratton."

When he made no move, she stepped over and wrapped her arms around him. Her pullover parted, and the sheer material of her swimsuit pressed over his crossed arms against his bare chest. For a split second, he felt her tender breath on his shoulder. His hands slowly dropped to his side. For a moment, he could only hold still.

"It's Mary," she said, just above a whisper. "After tonight, it's only ever Mary."

"Mary," he said, and had to force the air into his lungs to say anything else. "It will be all right." He looked over Mary's shoulder at her daughter, and cleared his throat. "H-hey, Krissy."

Krissy was still absorbed with her phone. Her jaw was quivering, and her eyes were moist, but otherwise she appeared calm. She looked up and said, "One of the nurses told me we have to make a police report. She said they're really busy with the crowd control and stuff, but we still have to talk to the cops."

"I'll take care of it," he said.

Mary let go of him and once more wiped reflexively under each eye. "Reagan, why did you put the towel on that man's face?"

"You didn't need to see that."

"See what?"

"We... we were wrestling with the knife and he got cut and just stopped moving. The whole thing was nuts. Something is wrong. That guy at the pier was crazy. And then that other guy... You saw that naked dude running down the street. It's like there's something in the water. I'm kinda freaked out. I need to talk to some people that have been here for the last couple nights. Maybe the cops can tell me what's going on." He nodded down at Krissy's phone. "Have you found anything online?"

Krissy looked down, and started to shake her head but stopped.

"Is that a no?"

She stopped texting and cried, "I literally just got a signal. Literally just now. My dad just got stabbed. You might try being a little supportive, you know. You're my boyfriend, Cas. Remember?"

He went to Krissy and wrapped his arms around her. Standing there in a t-shirt and shorts, hair held back by designer sunglasses, white bikini straps visible on each shoulder, an 18-year-old beauty that caught the eye of every man who walked by, she held stiff, her arms down at

her side, and Reagan held her like a sister.

He told Mary, "I don't know when I'll talk to the cops. If the road is clear, I'm going to try to get back and put up the boat."

Mary sighed. "What about the crazy man?"

"I'll be careful. Maybe I can come back with some of our stuff." He patted Krissy's shoulder when he disengaged, but she still didn't look up. "We don't know how long we're going to be here. It could be days."

"Days? Oh, God." Krissy started to cry again.

He left them with a promise to be back just as soon as he could, and exited the hospital chaos. He started to jog, and felt the car keys in his pocket. The crazy man's vehicle would still drive, but Reagan wasn't worried about speed. He wanted to hear the island, wanted to sense it, and in no way wanted to be confined in a strange car if suddenly attacked.

On this spring night on Stock Island, a few blocks away from Cow Channel and the short bridge onto Key West, stars smattered the sky and a breeze carried the smell of something burning, along with the usual scents of seawater and tropical plants. There had been no police in the ER, and no police cars outside, and he wondered how long it would be until he had to explain the killing on the pier. A normal soon-to-be college graduate would have been a wreck of emotions.

But there was very little *normal* about Reagan Castaneda.



He didn't grow up obsessed with the end of the world. Until the age of fifteen, he'd been something of a momma's boy. His father worked construction, rode a motorcycle, drank heavily, and did little else. He and his sister, Miranda, were raised by their mother, a sweet-hearted, cherub-faced woman with wide hips and an abiding belief that she was blessed, no matter how many times she had to help her inebriated husband get into bed at night.

One day, Miranda told Reagan that she was going to start working at a yogurt shop. She wasn't worried about money, just wanted to buy their mother a birthday present.

Mother had always fussed over them and knew exactly what they liked and what they hated, but for all the presents packaged with care that they ever opened, they'd never seen their mother receive a real gift. Father always gave her the same things – earrings or perfume – every birthday, every Christmas, every Mother's Day, always the same. Never mind that mother rarely wore perfume and cared nothing about jewelry. Miranda had it in her head to save up some money and buy her a gift on her own, something Mother *would* appreciate.

Fourteen-year-old Reagan Castaneda could think of nothing more glorious than to see his mother's face upon receiving a gift bought with hard work and love. How would she feel to know how much they adored her?

He hassled his father to let him work concrete with the day laborers that he hired, but his father had just laughed. He was too young, and the other men would complain. However, his dad had a brother, Juan, who did brick work with usually just one or two hired hands, and Juan told Reagan he could work with him. Reagan worked all that summer for six dollars an hour. He worked hard in the relentless South Florida sun, and by the end of summer, not just Uncle Juan, but all the other *vatos* on the work sites had taken their *pendejo* as one of them.

When school started again, he continued to work with the men on his weekends, and that September, Mother opened a birthday card from her two children.

She didn't just find the usual birthday wishes, but also a gift card for a weekend at a posh day spa in Long Beach. This was why her beloved children were working, and that realization made her cry so hard that, eventually, even Father came inside from the front porch and asked

if she was all right. Of course, she didn't need to be consoled. Yes, everything was fine. It was more than fine. It was perfect.

And it would stay perfect for the rest of that fall. Reagan now had money he didn't know what to do with, but Uncle Juan, who had an actual bank account at an actual bank and knew about these things, told Reagan that he should open an online trading account and invest his money. He was young, and now was the time. So, Reagan's mother opened an account, and he put his money into it under her name. The year was 2008.

When the financial sector collapsed, and Reagan saw his little nest egg evaporate, he searched the internet for the reason why. It was then that he first encountered the words, Peak Oil. Knowledgeable men explained, with a brutality that only mathematical charts can deliver, how the world had reached the point at which it was drawing oil from the ground as quickly as it ever would. The easily reached reservoirs were tapped. From now on, the amount of oil available to the industrial world would ride its current plateau, and eventually decline. The world economy, based on eternal growth, would wobble through saw teeth of bankruptcies and restructuring, and all the while, prices for the basic necessities, for food and water, would rise until *the shit hit the fan*. That meant that social order would break down, and the strong would survive by living off of the weak and the unprepared.

Reagan was an intelligent child, smart enough to see the plain logic of this grim future, but he was also a momma's boy. So the feeling of impending doom swirled and blustered outside the safe walls of his home. It would be all right, somehow. He didn't know how, but somehow. Even if the proverbial shit did hit the fan, his mother would smile and cook, and decorate, and hug, and it would all be okay. His mother and her soft hair would always be there; his mother and her ever-present smile; his mother and the undiagnosed lymphoma that would end her life only seven months after the Lehman bankruptcy.

At fifteen years of age, Reagan stood everyday over the little urn in his mother's backyard garden, with tears streaming down his cheeks. He'd been living a lie. The world had no safe havens. It was a machine with gears and teeth that mangled its innocent victims, and when the shit did hit the fan, as it surely would, Reagan Castaneda would be ready. For the world and its servants, those strong men harvesting the lives of the innocent sheep around them, he would be waiting – waiting to tear their throats out with his bare teeth, waiting to make this savage world pay for what it had done to his mother.

As soon as he started prepping, his friends all made fun of him. "*We don't need to get ready,*" they said. "*We'll just wait until it happens and take all your stuff.*" He told them to just try it.

Still, a thought formed that prepping for the fall of mankind – real prepping – had to be done in secret. All the people he saw on TV, with their bunkers and their camouflage, were drawing attention to themselves. Maybe someone really would slit their throats in the middle of the night. And so, Reagan told anyone who would listen – and since his childhood friends were becoming more distant, now that they could no longer understand him, those numbers were few – that it had all been a phase. The world would go on as it always had, and Reagan Castaneda would be just like everyone else.

*Nothing to see here. Move along.*

Then he *really* started prepping.

He divided his efforts into categories: combat training, self-sufficiency skills and knowledge, cash and barter goods, survival gear, relationships that might prove useful, and, finally, scenario training that would give him some sort of idea of the problems he might face in a world gone mad.

For the first, he enrolled at a martial arts school. After exploring his options, he would have



preferred Japanese Jiu Jitsu or one its many offshoots, like Krav Maga or Aikido, but not far from his house in the blue-collar end of Hialeah Gardens in Miami, he found a Thai boxing gymnasium run by a Polish-born world champion, who had learned Muay Thai while working overseas for an import/export company. The location was essential since, by this time, his father once again spent more time on his cross-country bike rides than he did in town, and since Miranda could not always give him a ride.

The art may have been less than ideal for a world outside the fighting ring, one that would soon be full of weapons and completely emptied of rules, but the instructor was perfect. Jan Dzien, Master Jan, was the very picture of focus and intensity. He fully expected his students to beat their shins against wooden posts – or any other hard surface, for that matter – until they could hardly walk. He would run them around the gym, then out the doors and down a hillside, and into the shallows of the nearby pond, where they had to block each other's punches while he splashed water into their eyes. He taught Reagan how to be hard, how to be strong, how to stare the mad, diseased world right in the eyes, grit his teeth, and fight with every last ounce of his energy. Reagan was still a young man who sometimes felt afraid, but after many months training with Master Jan, he would never again feel powerless.

However, to be a prepper meant to be a realist. He wanted to make himself as difficult a target as possible, and after watching any number of pure stand-up martial artists tied into pretzels or choked unconscious by experienced grapplers in the octagon, he decided that he needed some ground fighting skills as well. He didn't have the money to spare from his cash and barter fund for another martial arts dojo, so at the start of his junior year in high school, he went out for the wrestling team. It was awkward at first, because he wasn't built like a wrestler, at just over six feet of wiry muscle. He didn't care about championships, however... only technique.

Brooks Hinckley, who sneered when Reagan first showed up in the gym wearing a muscle shirt and pair of plaster-stained jean shorts, cared only about himself. Brooks – good-looking, stocky, compact in the ideal wrestler fashion, utterly lacking impulse control – and Reagan soon became friends. With Brooks, that meant that he practically requisitioned Reagan to drive his semiconscious body home from parties, apologize to girlfriends for him, answer, *"Yes, Brooks is spending the night,"* if his parents ever called and asked, and negotiate all the other intricacies of teenage life that Brooks couldn't be bothered to master for himself. This forcibly put Reagan in the crosshairs of the *in* crowd, something he'd never experienced, but which he thought might figure into his category for useful relationships.

Although he rarely flirted with the popular girls – none of which he thought would last five minutes in a true survival situation – once he started hanging around the popular boys, he became fair game for them. They needed little encouragement.

*"Hello Reagan. Are you going to be at Thomas's party Saturday night, Reagan? You know who you look like Reagan? You look like that soccer player."*

Reagan had his Mother's soft Anglo-French facial features, his father's dark Hispanic skin, and a body being tempered by hour upon hour of strenuous Thai boxing, and even more strenuous wrestling, and then brick-laying almost every weekend. His frame filled out, and by his senior year, he attained true popularity. Everyone had forgotten his brief stint as the strange boy who thought the world was ending, sitting by himself and eyeballing the rest of them in the cafeteria.

After graduation, he followed Brooks to the University of Florida and the Sigma Phi fraternity house. The school was close enough for him to drive home on weekends for work and a boxing session or two. And frat life would give him a chance to test how well he could

ingratiate himself into a group of people who were nothing like him – a test for his situation category.

Brooks was a legacy. He was also a practiced alcoholic. Reagan thought Brooks would emerge in Greek life like a hedonistic messiah who arrived merely in answer to destiny's call. Brooks was ideal. What he did not expect is that he himself would become the frat's iconic figure, the one they all called 'the legend' – only half-joking.

It started during pledge week, when they were forced to drink until sick, and stand in the backyard of the frat house while one of the seniors came around and smacked them hard on their legs with a wooden paddle. The senior hit one of the pledges so hard that the boy dropped to the grass, balling in pain.

Then Reagan stepped out of line and playfully challenged, "Hey, man, what the hell?"

The senior swung at him.

Reagan lifted a leg, and when the paddle splintered against his hardened shin, he never even flinched.

"Drunkvincible, man."

After their sophomore year, Brooks was expelled for an on-campus fight and a grade point average worthy of John Belushi. Reagan considered leaving the frat and becoming one of the nameless faces walking the campus. In fact, he cared not even a little whether the other Sigmas liked him – they were all sheep – but the others somehow mistook his apathy for the height of cool. Nothing phased Cas, and it soon became apparent that they would never let him fade into the crowd. They wanted to be like him. They wanted to know him, and called him when he was working out by himself, or at home on the weekends, and asked him where he was at and what he was doing. Reagan had to dedicate whole pages of his survival journal to all the lies he had told.

He found sorority girls ridiculous, but they too mistook his feelings. Cas was hard to get. He would be the ultimate challenge, the ultimate conquest, for somebody. He dated a few of them, but never for long. None of them learned his secrets.

Krissy was a convenience, someone he used as a shield. He was ready to graduate and go back to Hialeah Gardens, and dating her kept the others away. She was safe, too – he would never have any feelings for her. She was too immature and much too self-conscious. She was, however, exceedingly rich, with a father in Greenwich who commutes to his office in Manhattan, and owns a fifty-foot yacht docked by his four-thousand-square-foot beach house in Naples, rich. The idea of wealthy contacts fit squarely into his useful relationship category, even if he couldn't quite figure out how to exploit it, since he had no intention of ever living with the obnoxious girl, and wanted even less to work in finance like the old man.

What Reagan Castaneda wanted was land. He wanted to work contract jobs, off the books, to stay under the government's radar, while he saved enough money to buy a plot of farmland where he could grow a few crops and keep a few chickens. His sister Miranda had married a court reporter and moved to Fort Meyers, and he barely kept in touch with his father, except for the rare weekends where they were both in the house at the same time. Reagan would work, and he would save, and he would find a place away from any major highway with fresh water and clean sight lines in all directions.

And no one would ever ask him about either one of the men he had killed.

The first was two years ago while scenario training. Over Christmas break, he took a commuter bus into the Everglades. He walked back with nothing more than his clothes and an ID. At a roadside gas station, he asked a few drivers if he could hitch a ride. Two men tried to rob him.

At the gym, Reagan had been pulling his punches for years. Even with the gloves on, his strikes had become dangerously powerful. Other fighters wanted their strikes to be hard enough to win. Reagan wanted his strikes to be perfect – tight fingers, wrist straight, knuckles too callused to flinch. He wanted perfection, and he didn't want any of the others to know how close he had come to attaining it.

That night, the two robbers were both transported to an emergency room over an hour away. One of them died from a brain bleed. Reagan had pulled nothing. Now he knew: he could kill with his bare hands.



The man on the pier was technically only his second kill. *Technically*. But in Reagan's mind, he was not the hundredth or even the thousandth. His mind had come to think of the world in terms of threat assessments. He would stand next to someone, or sit beside them in class, and imagine them suddenly pulling a weapon. To him, he'd not just killed one or two; in his imaginings, he'd already destroyed legions.

No one ever knew. They never even suspected the truth. He looked just like them, after all, and he would go on looking just like them, as long as he could somehow convince the police that he was just an innocent victim, and convince Mary that he had just managed to take a *precious* human life out of desperation, in order to save her idiot husband.

He might also need an excuse for his physique. *My hobby is rock climbing. No big deal.*

He had slipped up while driving: *Alternate routes. Why did I say that?*

He'd let the moment overwhelm him. That was something for the future. He had to be careful what he said in the heat of the moment, if he wanted to maintain the ruse.

*Unless I no longer need the ruse.*

Part of him wished to God that this were true. If the shit had hit the fan while he was on a boat in the Gulf of Mexico, trying to pick up useful fishing tips and trying, really and truly trying, to maintain his sanity in the vortex of elitist snobbery that infused every inch of space between Charles and Krissy Stratton, then maybe he could drop the act. This could be his Coming Out party, his own little survivalist *quince*.

*But is it?*

Now he needed intel, to get his overnight bag off the yacht, and a plan. The man who had been preparing for nine years suddenly found himself playing catch-up on a running clock.

*But what kind of clock is running? What in the world is happening on this island, and does it even warrant a survivalist response?*

The ex-army ranger that dominated his favorite survivalist site had a saying: "Prepare for the worst survivable scenario, and then walk it back."

Don't prepare for the Earth to go hurtling in to the sun. There's nothing you can do about that. Start with the worst-case scenario for anything you *could* do something about. When you find out it's not that bad, you've lost nothing, you've just over-prepared. No loss.

He started.

*One derelict boat. One deranged man with a knife and oddly purple lips. Two car crashes. One still blocking the bridge between Stock Island and Key West as I jogged over. Nearly as many cars going onto the island as there are coming out, a few honking with impatience. The guy we saw in the street...*

His first thought was drugs, something heavy-duty, something spread all over town. Then he thought about how gullible some people, like Brooks Hinckley, could be, and thought about *drinking the Kool-Aid* and where that expression came from, and he revised: a cult where everyone just drank some purple narcotic that makes them all violent. Then he thought about his favorite movies of mass violence, and he revised his worst-case scenario again. The thought

was so absurd that he said it out loud.

*"Zombies."*

He laughed as he jogged past the strip shops in New Town.

*Zombies. Fast movers.*

That was it, the worst-case – but still theoretically survivable – scenario.

It made him want to stop in place and log on. Zombies were not a real collapse scenario. In the survivalist blogosphere, Zombies were just a hypothetical, a game preppers played to think through collapse without really facing up to the shroud that hung over all their lives.

*Get your stash. Get up high and pull up the ladder. Get to a boat. Get to an island. If you could only take one celebrity to your island, one book, one album, one movie... what do you pick?*

You could chuckle to yourself while you planned for the inevitable.

Certainly, he wasn't going to work his way down from something as insane as a viral rabies epidemic that turned everyone into killer zombies. But in Reagan's mind, the possibility had to be confronted logically before it could be dismissed. He'd already learned that lesson through his training. Be disciplined. Think it through.

*Could the missing boat captain be attributed to infection? Absolutely.*

In fact, a sudden disease seemed far more likely that anything else he could think of.

*The man with the knife? Maybe. Maybe not.*

In the last four years, Reagan had been cozy with any number of overdose cases. He once stopped Brooks from stripping down on the front lawn of the Gamma house. The man on the pier looked like he might have just smoked K2, but he also could have been sick. The car crashes? Sure. The man he and the girls had seen running in the street? Now that one looked different. His arms were down at his side. His shoulders were hunched forward. He looked vaguely ape-like. Dangerous. If not for the girls, Reagan might have run him down. Could he have been on a drug? The same drug?

Then Reagan stopped jogging, breathing heavy, looking straight at the three-car wreck that had forced their detour, still in the middle of Roosevelt Street, and the two men fighting – not like rage-fueled zombies, just like normal men, swinging ineffectively while their women tried to pull them apart. But behind them, and off on the sidewalk beneath a light pole, stood a collection of others.

He observed their faces, one by one: a middle-aged man in business attire twitched.

Drugged? Infected? Reacting to an insect bite?

*What the hell is going on?*

No disease or drug caused the riot.

*Unless it did. What if the two bikers were just like the man on the pier? Is this collapse? How can I be sure?*

How could anyone ever be sure? History was littered with the bodies of the sheep that never saw it coming.

*How can anyone know when the shit was about to hit the fan? How do you know when to stop playing by the old rules, tell the boss what you really think of him, start shattering storefronts, and shoot anyone that tries to take your stash?*

Argentina during the collapse... New Orleans during Katrina... out of the blue, one day their lives were completely normal, and the next it was pure chaos.

*What if there is a disease, but nobody noticed the spread because they're too busy with their little 'civil unrest'?*

A mother was pushing a stroller right in front of him, next to a street where every tenth car

sped by as if the driver had just seen the devil. Down the street, in the parking lot, laughing, shouting teens ducked suddenly at the sound of gunshots, then looked around, then went right back to their laughs and their shouts. In the distance, a man dressed like law enforcement, with a plastic shield swinging at his side, emerged from an apartment courtyard, running full tilt in the opposite direction from Reagan. And another.

And another.

Somewhere on the island, a dam was starting to break.

*Sheep! Even if they don't see it.*

He did. Reagan moved. This time he ran, not jogged, just as fast as the police he'd seen fleeing whatever was behind them. He needed to get on the boat, had to get his equipment.

A car sped out of the pier parking lot nearly just like Reagan had two hours before. He ran wide around the cars – too many places for a surprise attack – and stopped at the water's edge. The body still lay right where he'd left it, but someone had moved the towel.

He walked to it, stepping around the blood. Reagan thought the only blood he got on him was Stratton's, but the thought of coming cheek to cheek with whatever this was made his skin crawl.

The boat had drifted only a little.

From the south, in the direction of Duval and Caroline Streets and the usual hubbub of downtown, he heard the angry rushing water sound of a constant din of human voices. Screams? Cries? Shouts? Glass breaking? It had all blended together into a single cacophony of human chaos – the riot still in full swing, and whatever it was hiding.

Whatever it was incubating.

Reagan stopped a moment at the pier. If he was wrong, this was going to take one hell of an explanation. Breathing hard, he untied the rope and stepped quickly into the dinghy, then pull-started the motor. Next, he steered the little boat to the center of the bight, where the yacht floated, and tied it onto the back. He had no time for the niceties of minimal wakes or steering away from the buoys as he powered the *Bull Run* away from Key West. Now he had one more riddle to answer: how do you hide a fifty-foot yacht? Further complicating matters, he was running low on both time and gas.

He needed to find a place to put the boat where he could easily reach it later, so that he could start making store runs before they all emptied.

He had to assume the worst: whatever had scattered the cops was going to provoke a response.

*Tanks, helicopters, gunships; if it's a world with a rapidly progressing infection, I'm the cliché hospital patient who just woke up surrounded by crazies.*

Charles Stafford would survive the attack, and Reagan and the girls would have to wait until Charles could be moved to get off the island. Key West would be several days into some kind of quarantine by then, and Reagan would have to move three New England socialites – who defined a yacht's toilet backing up as a crisis – through a gauntlet of soldiers in HAZMAT suits and a waterway blockaded by the navy.

He gazed out at the lights on the tiny islands that formed a close-knit ring to the north and to the west. He first steered around Wisteria Island, the wind fluttering his hair. The boat was a luxury machine and handled like one.

For three days, Reagan had found reasons to get close to the old man while he sat in the pilot's chair, so that he could memorize the controls.

He thought of anchoring on the far side of Wisteria – no one else was there – but that felt wrong. He had to think.

*No one else is there!*

That meant a yacht, by itself, would look highly conspicuous. So, he went south the few hundred yards to Tank Island. This one was crowded with high-end houses, and people, probably too many, but Reagan had few choices, and a boat left here would look like it belonged.

*Wait for dark. Create a distraction. Slowly inch away from the pier, then make a run.*

It was madness. Reagan laughed aloud and shook his head. His mind, for which he'd been running simulations for nine years now, began to sink its teeth into the real thing. If he were to come back for the boat, he would need help. The Strattons were dead weight. He was going to have to attach himself to some other survivors – extra hands, extra guns, lookouts. He needed to start making useful contacts as soon as he got back.

He moored the boat at a dock on the south side of the island, then ran to the ship's hold and grabbed four empty gas cans, which he took back to the dinghy. He then scurried from room to room – a few soup cans, a jar of peanut butter, and two loaves of bread. The perishable food would be useless. He pulled the nice heavyweight flashlight out of the galley, then stuffed clothes and bath items into a pair of duffle bags in the master bedroom. Lastly, he carried the bags into the VIP room where he and Krissy had been sleeping, on the wall-mounted berths that nearly touched at the top of the V-shaped room. For two nights, he'd gone to sleep with his head only a few feet from a steady stream of sorority gossip and sexual innuendo, all giggling delivered with so little real emotion that it felt like she was reading lines off a teleprompter.

*Kiss it goodbye, Krissy, he thought. Kiss it all goodbye.*

He found another long-sleeve shirt for himself, then changed into jeans. He would have to get gloves and a mask back at the hospital. When he finished pushing in clothes and toiletries, he slung one of the overstuffed bags over his shoulder and, with the same arm, picked up the other. Next, he went to his berth and the innocent-looking overnight bag. He lifted it and unzipped it with his teeth – razor, toothbrush, hair gel, washcloth, and underneath the washcloth a double layer of Ziplocs with a compass, a box of Everlight matches, one fixed-blade knife in its scabbard, tape, a single roll of bandages, and a Beretta .45 PX4 with one extra mag, nine rounds in each clip, one in the chamber.

He looked up at the bathroom mirror.

He was smiling.

# CHAPTER 3

## The World of Max-A-Millions South Florida

Welcome to the world of Max-A-Millions, your one-stop spot for the truth. I've been workin' these streets for nine years, drivin' every stretch of this island a million times over. There ain't nothin' I don't know, either 'bout Key West, beach life, or just plain livin'. I could retire on what I earned and make millions with what I know, but I do it for the love of the people.

People see me – the dreds, the shiny grill – and they think, 'He's a local.' Then they catch the tie, the crisp shirt, and the wicked-sharp jacket, cuff buttons and all, and they go, 'He's a smart local.' That's how you get the fares. That's how I get paid.

What they *don't* see is the bank. Now, I ain't got time for some fancy guy in a suit, hidin' in a marble building, to take cash off the top just for stuffin' my bills in a vault. That's why I got a tub. It's marble, just like the bank, and even has these fancy claw feet on the bottom. Best part? No one's skimmin' off the top, 'cept me when I get a hankerin' for dark chocolate, if you know what I mean.

Most folks, they just see what they wanna see, like lookin' at a photo album filled with familiar pictures. Folks don't see enough about me to know I'm not from Key West, or Jamaica – even though I slip in the accent on some people. They see what they wanna see, and my job is to let them see what they wanna see.

Last summer, this one lady, a slick dresser in a summer suit and a skirt that wrapped what she had just right... she started askin' all kinds of crazy questions. I answered every last one, each one a gem she scratched down in a notebook. When I dropped her at the airport in Miami, she told me I was a fool if I didn't start writin' all this down – to put down a book so other folks can learn from my wisdom. I told her I'm an artist. I put down my rhymes to spit the truth and get my words out there, so I ain't got time for no book. But my old lady – she's back in Dallas – when I told her about this fancy lady, she got me a recorder for Christmas. When I hit record, it just starts to flow. Who am I to slow it down? So here we are.



### DAY 2 or Some Shit

I work this diary to get my thoughts down – just click on the red button and spill my brains onto tape. I ain't sure what to do with it yet, but if someone wants my wisdom, all they gotta do is pay my fare.

First off, welcome to Key West. There ain't no island stranger than the one I'm from. The water is the same on both sides of the island, but everything in the middle is plain old mixed up – crazy stuff, scary stuff, some stuff that just don't make no sense. That's why we like it, and that's why people come here to see it. But I'm not about the island. I'm about business. Makin' money!

Most people, without the tourists, they always gonna fail. Who wants a *I went to Key West*

and got this stupid Key West t-shirt when you live here? No one, that's who. And disposable cameras? A stupid invention, if you asked me, useless if you got a bungalow on the island. Hats, towels, statues, carved coconuts... I ain't got a use for none of that. But what you need – what you *really* need when it hits the fan – hey, I got it all! Just wave your hand, flag me down, and I've got your hookup.

The other drivers love their fancy meters, but I've been doin' this so long, I can tell you the distance and fare between any stops in the Keys. I can quote the price for anything between the southernmost tip of the United States and Miami Beach. Only been wrong once in the past two years, and I comp'd the man's fare to prove it.

The secret for me is *my system*. I got a system and a plan at every level – plans, contingencies, fallback strategies, all that stuff. They always say land's the most important thing, but they ain't near the beach. They got it wrong, man, jus' plain wrong. It's people... that's what matters. People always gonna need something more than they got. The people that can get ahead of that curve, that's the one's that'll be here when it falls apart. Need a ride? Bam, I got you. Need gold? Bam, I got you. Need a toothbrush? Got two in the trunk right now, waitin' for some playa with bad breath lookin' for a lady. Need women? I can find them too. Someday you're gonna need something as simple as a glass of water. Bam! Just flag me down and watch me check the trunk of my car. You get what you want, and so do I.

Folks always tell me how the government is gonna save us, that they gonna spend money on me. On me? I know what I see. I drive folks by the Lester House all day – I mean *all day*. The government spends money on money. Taking people's money, spending people's money, keeping people's money – that's all they do. Money, money, money. Me? I got a system. You need something, you pay for it. That's how Max made his millions.

I can convert a glass of water or a tube of sunscreen into money faster'n a bank. You just gotta know people. You gotta know how to get what people want and give it to 'em. There's an advanced class, though. That's called givin' people what they already have. Guy leaves his wallet in my trunk? He's gonna give me a wicked tip to get it back. His wallet minus a fee for my services, and he's payin' to get his own stuff back.



### DAY 3

The way I see it, you're either a sheep or a shearer. You act like a sheep, you get fleeced, trimmed down to your skin or more. You play your cards right, it's gonna grow back, and you can even make yourself feel better that you helped out the shearer. Then I come along, whip out the sharpened blade, and keep myself ahead by strippin' others to the short hairs. Ain't nothin' wrong with either plan. You just gotta make choices about who you are and what you gonna do.

Kids? I got two... back at home in Dallas. They come down when they can, but there's no use havin' 'em down here all the time – too many distractions. They need to focus on school, get they butts to college, I tell 'em. I'm gonna need 'em to run the country, when they're older. Can't do it all myself. Besides, I'm gonna need 'em to look after my money. I didn't do all this hard work just to let them throw it all away on overpriced J's and some snotty cafe latte or something on the corner of "wasting" and "my money."

My world is my car. Everything revolves around the four wheels beneath me. I depend on it, sometimes more on faith than I want to admit, so you might call it a religion. It rewards me when I do well, punishes me for my weakness, and gets me where I wanna go.

My first one was a used 1997 Honda Accord – teal green, like some sorta Easter egg-colored island carriage. It cost me a bottle of air freshener almost every other day, and I'd had enough



blue coconut mist around me that I smelled like a walkin' Pina Colada. But hey, folks expect stuff in paradise.

My latest one, the *War Bus*, was a pristine, white, 2012 Ford Escape. It had midnight tint on the back windows, and I'd had Johnny Q from Car World build me some secret compartments. I could hold nearly twice the cargo as the factory model. He gave me a deal on a special "hurricane" wrap on the windows that made them three times as strong as tempered glass, and he attached a couple of carbon fiber panels inside the door—for *driver safety*. He'd stitched in a holster in the driver's seat, big enough for my sawed-off pistol grip, and even managed to mount a few hidden compartments in the ceiling.

Just like a smuggler, but I was only movin' things to sell to tourists. If you know what you're doin', there's more money, and less risk, givin' people legal stuff than tryin' to sneak around with contraband. And with all these protesters runnin' around, the cops are everywhere. Righteous is the way to be.



### DAY 5... The Day Some Set Dude Lost His Mind in my Car

Headin' back from Miami... it's a long run, but it pays the bills. It also gives me time to fill in a new entry about this guy I just drove to the mainland. Might make a good song one day.

I do a lot of runs to and from the hospital, mostly people that broke something or put something where some things don't belong. Most don't want to be seen in an ambulance, and I offer a bit of *discretion*. When the docs are done, they want to tuck tail, get straight to the hotel, then the airport and back home, wherever that is. Not too many folks can leave a hospital, even in paradise, without anyone knowin' why they were inside. That's where I come in. They pay money for the speed, and even more for the secret. That's what fills the bath tub!

Like this one guy... called me to meet him at the entrance to the ER. Blue polo shirt, khaki shorts, and a just-off-the-rack panama jack straw hat—he was really tryin' to look the part. *Graham McMillan*, or whoever he really was, wanted folks to think he was a tourist, but he was *not* here for pleasure. He carried a metal briefcase, black, not silver, and kept lookin' at an email message blinkin' on his phone.

Most folks sit in the back, but this guy jerked open the front door and plopped right down in my passenger seat. I was used to weird, but rude was another story. I was about to make a scene when he flattened two hundreds on the center console.

"I'm a firm believer in discretion between friends," he said.

"I'm not sure we're friends," I answered, palmin' the money and slippin' it into my shirt pocket. "But I think discretion can be a fine thing.

"Then just drive."

I'd had my SUV for a few months, and taken my share of twitchy fares, but this guy seemed completely uncomfortable, shifting in his seat like the upholstery was bitin' him. You'd think paradise itself had been gnawin' on him.

I was so focused on my passenger that I almost hit the bumper of a yellow cab waitin' for a fare to the airport. *Moon Man* Marqueza would have been pissed if I gave him a love tap. Then again, he tended to fall asleep behind the wheel between fares, cloggin' up the taxi lanes.

I pressed the accelerator to the floor and jerked the wheel hard to the left. The engine roared and I slipped between two oncomin' mopeds like a football through a field goal. Once past them, I pulled a hard U-turn in front of a VW bug pullin' a trailer, and then cut hard to the right, exitin' through the one-way entrance into the hospital parking lot, avoidin' the cars still waitin' at the intersection. Sand and dead palm leaves flew up from my tires, but I kept one eye toward my passenger.

He caught me starin' and pulled his briefcase close to him. "Most drivers don't stare at their fares."

"Most fares don't come on this hard."

"I'm not most fares."

"And I ain't most drivers."

I'd worked worse-dressed folks for tips and extra cash for years, but this guy? What was his angle? He was scannin' everything around us, but not just the cars. I whipped through traffic, missin' side mirrors and fenders by inches, but he was more worried about something beyond the cars.

Might as well be direct, since we'd be at Key West International in five minutes. "Like I told you on the phone," I started. "I'm not just a driver, but a professional who specializes in travelers who need special favors. More like family than business."

"Then maybe you can tell me the best way to get off this island."

"Other than the airport?" I asked, watchin' him gently spin the twin combination dials on his case.

He caught me lookin' and quickly grabbed my name tag hangin' from my rear-view mirror. "Olivey? I thought your name was Max."

"I didn't pick it. My parents gave me the name. Since you're payin' the bills, you can call me what you want. Max usually works fine."

"And your accent? Jamaican? Haitian?"

"I am at home on the islands," I answered, soakin' each word in as much Bob Marley as I could muster.

My shirt sleeve had slid up a bit, revealin' my faded tattoo with a bold KC in the center of an ill-drawn outline of the state of Missouri.

"Really?" he asked. "I hear something different. Not quite island. Something a bit more domestic."

"Island or American, I can be who you want. That's the kind of family I am."

US 1 to Roosevelt was busier than usual. In front of me, the brake lights on a delivery truck blinked twice and I pulled around it, straddlin' the centerline to slip between the truck and an oncoming stream of vehicles. Blarin' horns from northbound travelers greeted me, and my tires squealed in protest as I tucked back in behind a camper-trailer.

The turn toward the airport was even worse, with a log-jam at Flagler and cars fillin' all four lanes. The highway was clogged with cars in both directions, and a pair of police cars were blockin' Flagler, sending everyone east or north.

"What's going on?" the man asked, leanin' out of the passenger window.

"Must be a wreck," I guessed. "Something big that they can't clear out. Cops got the strip all closed off after last night. I've steered clear of that mess for the last two days. I don't know what this is."

"It's nothing good," he said, kinda slow and serious. The man clutched his briefcase to his chest. "Do the local police do many checkpoints down here?"

"The police wouldn't snarl traffic like this. It's bad to slow down the tourists when they're spendin' money. Cars don't match our pedestrian lifestyle. It throws off the vibe."

"Isn't this the only road onto the island?"

"All roads lead somewhere. It just depends on where you want to go."

"My plane leaves Miami at 9 PM. Can you drive me there?"

"It's three and a half hours by car. This traffic'll change that a bit."

"There's an extra five hundred if we make it by 7 PM. I can get a drink before my flight

leaves.”

Time waits for no man. Neither do I, and now I was bein’ paid by the minute, not the mile. I cut hard to the right and pulled across the front lawn of Miss Terri Mondragaon. I made a mental note to fix her grass when I finished this job. I whipped up Eagle Avenue toward the residence of one Carolina Rockport. She’d installed automatic front and back gates when her husband bought an RV. When he ran off with Dulce from the Cabana, she needed help with a few arrangements. I ain’t nothin’ but a deal-maker, so when the deal was done, the widow Rockport gave me an opener for both gates – not Max’s only secret shortcut through town. I had a dozen of them by now, and with a quick tap of the blue garage door opener on my visor, I had a straight shot between the houses onto Duck Avenue and back on the road to Miami.

More police were showin’ up, lights flashin’ like it was a parade or something.

The man leaned forward, slidin’ a pair of fresh hundreds into my cup holder. “Let’s change things a bit. Keep us off the radar. Tell you what, if I can enjoy my last hours in the Keys without seeing anyone too ‘official,’ I’ll leave you an even thousand dollars.”

See, everyone has a price – either a thing they want, or a way they want their things. You just have to dig a bit to get them to strike a bargain. Ahead of me, the swath of red brake lights on US 1 gave little hope of gettin’ to the mainland too quickly. Whatever it was, it seemed to have started in KW and was sendin’ everyone north – probably stoppin’ to gawk at a dead seagull or some poor traveler changin’ a flat.

I made it to Miami just shy of 7 PM. The man had gone silent for the entire trip, his eyes watchin’ the blue water, then his watch, then back to the water – like he was tryin’ to lose himself in the ocean but didn’t want to be tardy about it.

Right before we took the loop into the airport, he said, “Max, what if I told you that I had a friend who was a health worker? What if I told you that this friend was supposed to check out one person to see if they had this really bad disease, but when he started seeing who they might have had contact with, he found out that it wasn’t one person anymore. It was over thirty.”

“I’d say your friend had a mighty big job ahead of him.”

His head slumped like he was in court and just got the guilty verdict.

I pulled up to his gate, pissin’ off two cabbies when I slipped between them. They yelled about the lack of a taxi stamp on my car. I told them I was sorry, just droppin’ off a friend at the airport. One runs off to call security, but my *friend* was already out of the car.

He shut the door and leaned back in, ten hundred-dollar bills held tight between his fingers.

“Why don’t you stay away from Key West for a while?” he asked. “This’ll set you up nicely, maybe for a week or so?”

“I gotta do what I do,” I answered, still workin’ the island accent, while slippin’ the cash into my shirt pocket.

“There’s nothing in Key West that is worth your life, is there?”

“My friend, I figure my life is all I got.”

“Ever thought of moving back to Kansas City?”

“These wheels belong back in Key West.”

He nodded funny. “Take care of yourself, Max. The world needs people who know how to handle themselves.”

Then he turned toward the terminal entrance, slippin’ by two security guards who were comin’ my way. I waved at them as I pulled away from the curb, earnin’ a loud honk from the bus behind me.

“The world needs a lot of shit.”

Kansas City was a bit humid this time of year, and Delilah did not particularly like surprises. I folded the bills and added them to my pocket, and took the exit back for US 1 to the Keys. I tapped the CD player on my console and pulled up a new track: Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll.

It wasn't Bob Marley, but this cat had some weird stuff goin' on in his head.

**---End of Special Sneak Preview---**

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END OF FILE. THANK YOU.

