

# THE WALKER CONSPIRACY

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## DEDICATION

For my wife Fionna, my children Maya and Liam, my parents Walt and Allyson and my brothers Adam and Jeremy.

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# CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere in Western Europe...

It began as a faint scratching sound from somewhere beside him. Had it just started or was awareness of this strange noise just now beginning? Groggily he shifted his weight and tried to lift his head off the cold stone floor. Searing pain ripped through his temple and seemed to settle right in the back of the neck as the top of his head began to beat like a metronome. Quickly-or maybe it was really slowly-he rested his forehead back on the hard floor. The exertion caused him to let out a small moan but at least this 'resting position' caused the pain to subside a bit.

"Wow, I'm in rough shape", Kevin Walker breathed to himself. He thought how normal that lucid thought seemed, given the present circumstances. Despite the pain in his head, at least his mind seemed to be working. He grinned slightly at this-causing the thumping on the top of his head to return in full force.

Kevin eased his mind back into oblivion and the pain again diminished. Just as the subconscious began to overtake his body, there it was again: the scratching

sound. This caused Kevin to snap back into the present. What was it? Was it coming from another direction? He heard it again, but this time it was in front of him. And also beside him. *What in the world?* he thought. The exertion in his mind caused his head to beat painfully again, but he pushed it away instead focusing on the unknown sound.

As his mind continued to clear, he suddenly knew. Rats-or if he was lucky, possibly just mice. More scratching ensued and now it seemed to be coming from directly behind. With growing alarm he instinctively wriggled his body. He could barely move. His legs and arms seemed to be almost immobile and he could not see a thing. His mind catapulted into panic and now the only thumping he could identify was that of his racing heart.

With a start, he realized his eyes were still closed. Angrily, he implored himself to calm down and take stock of his surroundings. He slowly opened his eyes and it was still almost as dark but he could at least make out a few shapes. What looked like the outline of a chair was directly ahead against a wall and just to the right of this there were some mounds stacked up. Possibly it was rolled up rugs or something stored under canvas? *Where the heck am I-some sort of a basement?* he thought to himself.

Kevin tried to squirm a bit more and realized that unbelievably, his arms and legs were bound. Furthermore, his mouth was gagged with what tasted like stale cloth. These were circumstances that until now, had escaped his attention! With equal parts rage

and panic, Kevin tried to yell but only a muffled gurgle escaped his mouth. He again tried to move his arms and legs and when this again met with no success, started to thrash wildly, trying anything to mobilize his arms and legs. The more he squirmed with no success, the more the terror welled up inside him. He again tried to yell but this time the tightly bound cloth tied in his mouth made him choke.

As he coughed violently trying to clear his airway from the invasive gag, he started to wretch uncontrollably. The cloth seemed to be pressing hard on the back of his throat. Struggling for air, Kevin was gagging and hacking so much he began to vomit. The terrible taste filled his mouth but this seemed to clear his airway a bit. Slowly Kevin again eased his mind and even managed to take a deep breath.

With his face just inches from the ground, he was practically breathing in his own vomit, but oddly this seemed to calm him down. He had gotten through the claustrophobic feeling of choking and not being able to breathe and was now again okay.

But Kevin knew he was far from okay. Lying on his stomach his arms were bound tightly behind him. With legs bent at the knees, ankles lashed together, another rope joined the bindings of both his wrists and ankles. This was tied so tightly his hands were actually touching his feet. He was well and truly hogtied. Hogtied and gagged-barely able to move and unable to make any sort of effective sound. Furthermore, he had some sort of head injury, evidenced by the throbbing pain that he was now again aware of.

Kevin squirmed to the right, shimmying his body so that he could see farther around to his side. It was still dark but his eyes were becoming more accustomed to his surroundings. He could see another wall—the same dirty concrete that the floor seemed to be made of. He squirmed himself further and could now turn his head to see the wall that had been behind him. He judged the room to be about ten feet by twenty feet. Was he indeed in a very small basement?

Craning his neck even farther around, he could make out a small shaft of light coming from the top of the wall near the ceiling. Sunlight? Tiny dust particles moved slowly through it, seeming to hover and dance while suspended lazily in mid-air. He couldn't help but think that the dust seemed so relaxed while he was as far from that feeling as humanly possible.

Suddenly Kevin heard the scratching sound again. His heart rate leapt immediately and a cold sweat broke out over his body. His eyes were now comfortable enough with the dark to make out two furry shapes scurrying near the wall behind him. Probably about six or eight inches in length, they were definitely rats. 'Damn it all', he muttered through the gag to himself. He couldn't help but ask himself why he was so scared of rats when his current predicament was so serious. Wryly, he remembered his mother's advice to him whenever a bee or barking dog came near him as a child. "They're more scared of you than you are of them", she would chide.

Kevin now wondered if this was the same with rats. *What the hell am I even thinking about?* he thought, giving

his head a painful shake. *Focus, and stop worrying about the damn rats!* Kevin tried another half-hearted wriggle knowing it wouldn't work but hoping that somehow the ropes that bound him would simply fall off.

Footsteps jarred Kevin from his thoughts. Footsteps!! His pulse and head started to pound and his heart raced wildly. The footsteps stopped at an unseen door to the left and a key turned inside a lock. *What in the hell is about to walk through the door!?* he thought crazily.

Slowly a heavy bolt creaked and the door swung open with a bang. Purposeful strides walked to the middle of the room and the sound of a light chain being pulled was followed immediately by a pale yellow light filling the room. Eyes wide and body contorted, Kevin strained to look up at the figure looming over him. It was a man dressed all in black with a balaclava pulled over his head. Piercing dark eyes peered down at him.

"So Mr. Walker, it is now time you give us what we need, yes?"

## CHAPTER TWO

Antibes, France... Two days earlier

The sparkling water of the Mediterranean spread out like a shimmering blanket in the early morning sunlight as Kevin Walker gazed out toward the sea, slowly taking his first sip of coffee. *This is what it's all about*, he thought contentedly to himself continuing to take in the scene around him. Off in the distance to either side of him the azure blue gave way to land with whitewashed terracotta houses and the occasional church steeple dotting the green, lush landscape. Directly in front of him, a row of impressive palm trees lined each side of the Boulevard James Wyllie, Antibes' beachfront thoroughfare. Fringing the palms was a wide pedestrian boulevard that immediately bordered the main attraction of this small city on the French Riviera-its beautiful crescent-shaped sandy beach. A few people walked the beach, others sat and simply enjoyed the view but it was mainly deserted at this early morning hour.

Walker took another long sip from his steaming mug and slouched lazily back in his chair. From

his vantage point on the second floor outdoor café of L'Hotel Bleu Poisson, he was no more than thirty yards from the beach. Below him began the familiar stirrings of a town slowly opening for business, readying itself for the onslaught of tourist beachgoers and locals alike. The sounds of storefront screens being rolled up, the shouts and greetings of shopkeepers, the clinking of bottles and the aromas of fresh pastries and coffee were pervasive in the warm, fragrant morning air. Soon the street would be teeming but not overbearing. *Classy yet quaint*, Kevin thought to himself, thoroughly enjoying the beginning of their second day in this gorgeous locale.

Pounding but slowing footsteps on the street below shook Kevin from his reverie. The gate leading to the balcony café swung open and scuffing footsteps could be heard running up the stairs.

"Hello sweetie", Kevin called out. "How was your jog?"

"Just lovely", responded Rebecca Walker. "I ran all the way to the end of the street, turned up Boulevard Marechal Foch and ran back through the neighbourhood just behind us. There are some beautiful little homes through there. Forty minutes. I feel great!"

"Great job love, you're more ambitious than me. I'm on vacation, no early morning exercise for me", Kevin said with an easy laugh. "Now come on over here and sit and enjoy the morning with me". Red-cheeked and glowing with perspiration Rebecca sat and put her feet up on her husband's lap. Kevin motioned to the passing waitress and ordered up a café latte for his wife and a selection of pastries.

“Wow, it sure is a gorgeous view. We’re right in the middle of it all here”. She looked him in the eye. “I love you Kevin; this is so much fun”.

“Yes, a much-needed vacation, that’s for sure!” The two held hands and let their gazes drift back to the beach and sparkling water view. The waitress again approached and set down Rebecca’s drink in front of her and the basket of pastries in the middle of the table.

“Merci beaucoup”, said Kevin, smiling up at their server. She smiled back sweetly at the couple, and then left to wait on a group of four that had just materialized at a neighbouring table.

“So how long until you think the kids will wake up”, volunteered Rebecca.

“Hmmp, teenagers, your guess is as good as mine”, chuckled Kevin. “Let’s enjoy the serenity while we can!” Kevin and Rebecca sat like that for another hour, sipping their coffees, chatting and munching on the warm pastries and strawberries.

“Morning mom and dad”, came a cheerful voice from behind them. They both half-turned in their chairs as their daughter Jane strolled toward them, shielding her eyes from the bright morning sun. “Oh good, you have breakfast ordered”, as she quickly took a seat and grabbed a pastry.

“Well morning to you darling”, said Kevin, leaning over to give her a kiss on the cheek. “Your brother up yet?”

“Sure is; I thought he was right behind me”, said Jane munching hungrily.

As if on cue, Jordan Walker flip-flopped lazily into the outdoor seating area, hair mussed and yawning widely.

“You’re a sight”, said Rebecca, falsely acerbic, flashing a wide grin at her son.

Jordan slouched down into the remaining chair in that typical teenager nonchalance. But his eyes were alight and he smiled back quickly at the rest of the family.

“I can’t wait to go swimming in the ocean again today. When are we going to the beach?”

“No sense wasting any of this beautiful sunshine. Finish your breakfasts while I get a shower and then we’ll head across the street and grab a spot on the sand before the hordes arrive!”, said Rebecca

With that she pulled herself up from her chair, gave her son a kiss on the top of his hair and sauntered into the hotel to get ready for the day.

Havana, Cuba

The sudden jarring ring of a telephone caused the heavysset man under the covers to twitch slightly. Another ring. And then another. With a quiet curse the man slowly straightened himself up and flicked on a bedside lamp. Rubbing his eyes he straightened his legs and walked tiredly to the bedroom door. As the phone continued its shrill interruption, he opened the door and quickened his pace as the level of alertness within him increased. He plodded down the plush staircase

and entered the living room before finally picked up the telephone on its eighth ring.

“Yes”.

“We have received word. It is within our sights and the project is a green-light”, came the voice at the other end of the line.

“See that it is done. You have the go-ahead to begin the project”.

“Very well. We will be back in touch when phase one is completed”.

The heavyset man clicked the telephone back into its cradle, and with this nocturnal chore completed, seemed to lose whatever energy was just gained. He sleepily and slowly walked back up the staircase and with a seemingly large effort got back into his bed. Grunting as he slowly returned to his prone position, he pulled the blanket up over his fat shoulder and was snoring again within two minutes.

#### Antibes, France

The day was indeed spectacular-even by the standards of the French Riviera in late August. A perfect 85 degrees Fahrenheit, the slightest breeze and a cloudless perfectly-hued blue sky welcomed the Walker family to their day at the beach. By late-morning they had taken up their position and laid out their assorted towels and blankets on the patch of sand that would be their home for the next several hours.

As the day glided on effortlessly, the beach, predictably, became a heaving mass of humanity. This was

not North America where long, wide beaches were prevalent in many locales. While famed for its coastline and yachting lifestyle, sand was actually a little hard to come by on the Cote d’Azur. Many beaches were of the pebble or stone variety. A sand beach like Antibes’ was a true gem and was the reason that even before noon barely a patch of golden sand could be seen.

Walker, laying back comfortably on his elbows, cold beer in hand, took in the scene around him. Though cheek to jowl, most of the families, couples or groups simply kept to themselves. *What a microcosm of Europe in general*, he thought to himself. *Very crowded, but everyone just efficiently minding their own business.* His family was no different.

Like any 14-year old boy would, Jordan Walker was spending much of his day frolicking in the waves. Though the breakers were pathetically small, he spent much of the day trying to body surf. The fact his efforts were yielding practically no results seemed not to phase him one bit.

Jane spent much of her time alternating between her towel, the cold drink hut and a quick cool-off every now and then in the water. Watching his thirteen year-old daughter run along the beach, Walker couldn’t help but think that she was moving out of childhood at an alarming rate. At times she was so young, but at other moments he thought she was beginning to bear a striking resemblance to her mother.

Rebecca had abandoned herself to complete relaxation for the day. Her early morning exercise had, rightfully so, given way to sunbathing, sipping pina coladas



and napping. Walker took a long pull from his frosty bottle and looked down at his gorgeous, tanned wife who was lying beside him. What a life she had given him, he thought, suddenly in a very reflective mood.

It had begun as a modern-day fairy tale with a chance encounter at a Manhattan nightclub almost exactly twenty years ago. Walker and a few of his work cohorts were out enjoying the scene at one of their go-to spots. Certainly this was not an uncommon occurrence for a bunch of single, professional twenty-something's earning a nice income with the confidence to match. Theirs was a life of excess, late nights and gorgeous women, but with a big difference from many of the nest egg young adults they rubbed shoulders with. No, their excess was fuelled solely by fourteen-hour workdays, pressure to perform on the job and the brains to match their work ethic.

For Walker's part, he had always worked extremely hard. His upbringing in a tough Boston suburb helped shape the man he would become. Seeing his dad limp up the driveway, dirty and exhausted from his day as a roofer not knowing if there would be work tomorrow, also drove him to excel. He wanted control over his own life-the lack of which he knew gnawed at his father.

So he worked toward an education and earned an Ivy League scholarship to Princeton University. At Princeton, Kevin eschewed the frat boy lifestyle that many of his fellow students aspired to as part of the Northeast establishment experience. Walker even cracked the roster of the Princeton basketball team as

a tremendously undersized 6'4" power forward, excelling under the tutelage of Pete Carrill's regimented offensive structure.

Upon graduation he brought the same intensity and work ethic to the business arena, hired straight out of the computing science program at Princeton. He went to work for one of the most powerful banks on Wall Street, Bear Stearns. For the next six years Walker worked diligently and passionately to build his career.

And this aura, this dedication and work ethic is what Kevin Walker liked to think first drew Rebecca his way. A birthday party for a sorority sister from her college days had brought her into the club that life-altering night.

The attraction was immediate. An engagement followed one year later, and then six months after that they were married in front of two hundred of their closest family and friends.

Children did not follow immediately as they continued to excel at their respective careers. But when Jordan and Jane did arrive, they were ready, and provided everything to their children to ensure they grew up properly. Already, they had a plethora of family memories-and now here they were on a fantastic vacation together!

Kevin caught himself grinning at the pleasant memories. He looked up from his blanket to make sure the kids had not strayed too far. There was Janie sitting at the water's edge, toes dug into the sand, sipping on a Coca-Cola. Where was Jordan? He scanned the water

but saw no sign. Looking to his right, his eyes searched the sea of bodies but came up empty. Kevin swivelled his head back to the left and again examined the mass of fleshy humanity for any indication of his son.

Suddenly, his eyes caught something! What was it? At light speed his eyes again found their target. A pair of eyes belonging to an expressionless face furtively looked toward the sand. He examined the man who by this time was looking out toward the sea. Darker-skinned, with a slight growth of beard he was sitting probably about 25 yards away next to another man. But what had caused Kevin to notice this? There was nothing remarkable about this person—indeed many men on the beach looked Mediterranean even bordering on Turkish or Middle Eastern. And then Kevin knew. Amidst the hundreds of faces on the beach this man looked tense on that first pass with his eyes. Everyone else was either smiling or relaxed. His subconscious had picked up on this. Or had it? Was he just seeing things? Kevin felt a twinge of uneasiness pass over him. This is ridiculous, thought Kevin, instantly pushing the anxiety from his mind. He kept looking at the man but he was now fully engaged in conversation with his friend and the two were pointing out to a yacht moored not far off the coast.

Kevin remembered what his mission had been—he still hadn't found Jordan. Though of age to take care of himself, a father still worried about his kids in a foreign place. Light sandsteps came up behind Kevin. It was Jordan holding four ice creams. "Hey dad, I thought we could all use a refreshment. My treat!"

## CHAPTER THREE

“C’mon Janie, mom and dad are waiting!”, came Jordan’s shrill voice. “They said 7 o’clock”.

“I am. Just a sec”.

Jordan, holding the door to their hotel room open, waited impatiently for his sister. She emerged from the bathroom brushing back her hair as she walked rapidly to the door. Half-running, they quickly scampered down the flight of stairs to the patio restaurant. Kevin and Rebecca were sitting hand-in-hand, again looking out to the Mediterranean, much like they had begun their day. Coffees were replaced by glasses of red wine as they sat enjoying the sun glowing a brilliant orange, creeping evermore toward the horizon line somewhere out at sea.

Their day on the beach had ended at around five o’clock and with the dinner hour approaching the family had decided to try the small neighbouring town of Juan-les-Pins, for their evening meal. This had been recommended by the proprietor of their hotel as a can’t-miss spot, complete with many restaurants from which to choose.

As Marie had explained to them, Juan-les-Pins and Antibes were sister resort towns located less than two miles apart. Most tourists coming to the area knew of Antibes, but not so much about Juan-les-Pins. In her words it was a bit of a 'hidden gem' and certainly lacked none of the features that a town along the Riviera was expected to have. A beautiful beach and yachting marina as well as world-class resorts, shopping and dining could easily be found.

Given the short distance and the sultry, warm night air-as well as the vin rouge that had been consumed already-the family decided to walk the short distance. Armed with some simple instructions, the Walker's set out for the quick 20-minute jaunt. After a few turns they soon found themselves on Chemin des Sables and knowing this was the road leading directly into town relaxed and enjoyed the slow pace and each other's company.

The road they were on basically traversed the peninsula that the two towns shared and cut quite a ways inland. There was not much traffic and the road became actually quite dark as the overhead canopy of trees blocked out the waning evening sunlight. For a good five minutes they did not pass another person and Kevin actually stopped to re-read the directions as the isolation did not seem to fit in with the festive world they had just left. "Should we think about doubling back hon?" Rebecca wondered as the kids' anxious faces peered into their parents' eyes looking for any hint of fear.

"There's no way we took a wrong turn. Marie said Chemin des Sables leads right into town".

"Well, there were a couple of roads back there that we crossed. Maybe one of those turned into Sables and we're now actually on a different road."

"Didn't seem like it, but I suppose you could be right. I've kind of been on auto-pilot the last few minutes", Kevin grinned.

At this cue the kids relaxed a bit. *If dad wasn't worried, we shouldn't be either.*

"C'mon, let's walk a bit farther. If we see no sign of civilization, we'll turn back. So our dinner will be delayed a little bit!"

Just at that moment the sound of a strong engine and blinding headlights appeared from around a bend in the road just ahead. Dazzled, the Walker family collectively shielded their eyes from the unexpected intense light coming toward them. They were on a stretch of road that didn't have a sidewalk and the street was quite narrow,

'Why is he going so fast', Kevin thought alarmed, as he herded his family closer toward the foliage lining the side of the road. Not knowing why, the image of the man who had caught his eye on the beach flashed into Kevin's mind. "Dammit, slow down", he muttered through gritted teeth.

And the powerful SUV did just that. It flicked off its high beams and slowed down to a speed more consistent with the narrow, winding road.

"Monsieur, monsieur, pardon moi", came the voice from the driver's seat with a friendly wave.

Fully recovered, Kevin waved back. "Juan-les-Pins?", he said gesturing ahead questioningly.

“Oui, oui”.

“We’re taking a taxi back”, commanded Rebecca. “That guy didn’t see us until the last second in this low light”.

“Fair enough”, breathed Kevin, still rattled from the surprisingly tense last few seconds. He put his arms around the shoulders of his two kids who were still a little scared. “Let’s go eat!”

Sure enough, the road opened up and the lights of Juan-les-Pins were soon visible ahead. Just like that people were everywhere as if they’d stepped through a portal to another world. They were soon walking through spirited bocce pitches and family gatherings. It looked like the place to be for the locals. Bottles of wine, the smell of cooking food, the dull thud of the heavy balls hitting the turf and the shouts of adults and kids could be heard everywhere.

“Must be some sort of a park where the locals gather in the evening”, said Rebecca, noting the obvious.

The park soon gave way to cafes and boutiques and just beyond that were larger resorts. The Walker family walked on toward the sea and soon hit the aptly named Promenade du Soleil. They were amidst hundreds of tourists all out enjoying the evening as they merged onto the lively thoroughfare.

Packed cafes and small restaurants lined the promenade and the white noise din of people laughing, glasses clanking and the occasional jovial shout melded into one never-ending hum. Stiff-backed

tuxedo-clad waiters scurried in a seemingly random yet choreographed pattern attending to their diners on the numerous outdoor terraces. Well-dressed lovers strolled hand in hand unhurriedly as other families with kids paced smartly through the crowds.

Just off the promenade lay more beach and into the impending darkness the golden sand gradually melted into grey nearer to the water’s edge. Beyond that was simply the murky pale blue, shallow orange and darkish hue combination of the early night sky.

“I love the French definition of a ‘hidden gem’”, Rebecca chuckled, now fully recovered from their scare of just a few minutes ago, as her eyes studied the marked contrast between the boisterous, well-lit revelry and the dusk sky out to sea. “It most certainly is a gem, but this place feels as hidden as Coney Island!”

“I wish they had the ferris wheel here that they have on Coney Island”, said Jane.

“Oh god Janey, you wish nothing of the sort”, Rebecca gently chided. “Look at all the charm and culture around us. A ferris wheel here would be a travesty!”

“Well London has one”, interjected Jordan. “Isn’t it the biggest one in the whole world?”

“Hey well, that’s England, not France. And that’s an absolute eyesore”, laughed his mom.

“While you guys are solving the world’s tackiness problems, my stomach is rumbling”, cut in Kevin. “We have about a hundred options here. Let’s eat soon!”

The Walker family chose a large restaurant near the end of the Promenade du Soleil, right next to a large but dignified resort complex. It was hamburgers, French

fries and Cokes for the kids and escargot, lobster thermidor and La Belle Epoque for Kevin and Rebecca.

After a good hour-and-a-half of talking, laughing and eating, Jordan and Jane went for a run around in the sand and a toe dabble at the water's edge. Finishing their dessert, lattes and cognac, Kevin and Rebecca watched their kids' running forms' melt into the darkness.

"Great kids", mused Kevin instinctively reaching for his wife's hand.

"Sure are. We're very lucky! How many teenagers do you know that would actually enjoy their parents dragging them through Paris and the French Riviera.

"I thought this family vacation was a little ambitious, but now..." Her voice trailed off. "But now I'm just so happy we took the plunge and we're together as a family. We sure deserve a treat like this after the last four years".

Kevin touched her cheek gently. "Sweetheart, I told you we'd figure it out. Now look, you're getting all emotional. Everything's fine. Things are getting back to how they should be and we're starting to live our life again. I mean, look around us..."

"I know Kevin. I never once doubted you-and I know you know that. All that downgrading to our lifestyle: the house, the schools for the kids, country club memberships, the vacations-it took its toll on me. On the whole family. This trip has kind of taken on a symbolic meaning for me. And I know we're not staying in 5-star hotels anymore, but in a way, this is much more fun". She wiped a tear from her cheek.

Kevin sighed and took a long pull from his snifter glass. "Downgrading is a rather harsh way to put it-but I suppose in the end it's also accurate". He looked her in the eye. "Maybe we lived too lavishly before".

"Kevin please. I know we weren't living in a cardboard box or anything, but come on. What we went through I wouldn't wish upon our worst enemy."

Rebecca took a large gulp from her champagne glass downing the rest of her La Belle Epoque. Then she looked up a little bit sheepishly. "Forgive me please", she whispered quietly. "You don't deserve this from me." Another tear rolled down her cheek. Kevin reached out and tenderly wiped the salty drop onto the back of his right index finger.

Rebecca half choked, half laughed as she tried to regain her composure. "I think I've had a little too much champagne. Oh god, listen to me; I'm ruining our beautiful evening".

"Far from it baby. You have every right to feel a little melancholy over the last few years", Kevin gently soothed. Then his voice took on an almost imperceptibly firmer edge. "That chapter is over now. In the past. Full stop. We need to stop dwelling on the past-as recent as it is".

Rebecca looked away, jolted slightly out of her self-absorbed thoughts by Kevin's subtle tone. "Of course you're right honey. Like I already said before my little waterworks display: I've always believed in you". She clutched his hand firmly and Kevin reciprocated immediately.

"I'm happy you can let me know how you're feeling. That's important."

She looked into his eyes. "I don't deserve you Kevin. I put a damper on our dinner and you find a way to make me feel good again".

"Shh, enough talk". He rose out of his chair, leaned over the table and planted an affectionate kiss on her forehead. "Let's get the check, kick off our shoes and join the kids on the beach."

Finding their kids at the water's edge with pant legs rolled up but still all wet, Kevin and Rebecca joined them for a shoeless walk along the beach. The sound of the waves rolling onto the beach provided a peaceful backdrop to the cacophony of human sound, even if the water lay invisible in the murky blackness out to sea. The area was still as lively as when they first arrived but being that it was past ten thirty, the Walker's decided to call it a night and make their way back to Antibes. Before kids the night would have been just getting started, but it was obvious, that while excited to be out in a celebratory environment, Jordan and Jane were fading quickly. A full day of sun followed by a long walk and dinner saw to that.

"Dad, can we take a cab back this time?", Jane whined, shoulders slumped forward in a manner that betrayed her fatigue.

"Without a doubt; I'm not walking on that narrow, dark road again". The family was silent, each recalling their own memory of that close call with the car coming around the bend.

It took no more than a few minutes to walk to a taxi stand and hire a cab. The family piled in, and despite the obvious irritation of the driver over what was sure to be a miniscule fare, were soon on their way back along the dark stretch of Chemin des Sables.

The ensuing two minutes would be replayed, dissected and analyzed countless times in the coming days. Out of nowhere blinding high beams and a strong, revving engine burst up behind the Walker's taxi. Just as they were about to be slammed violently from the rear, the mystery vehicle veered sharply to the left, speeding into the oncoming lane, then twisted back right and screeched to a halt at a forty-five degree angle partially blocking their lane. With a shout the taxi driver slammed on his brakes and with a painful skid, the cab shuddered to a stop just short of the vehicle blocking its path.

Jane and Jordan shrieked in unison as the force of the sudden stop pitched them forward. Rebecca in the middle back, screamed in terror, tentacling both her arms out in an instinctive motherly reflex against each child's chest. Kevin, sitting in the front passenger seat, let out a yell as he arched his back and braced his hands against the dashboard.

As this happened another vehicle rushed to a stop behind the taxi, headlights darkened. For one long second there was silence, as all three vehicles settled back onto their suspension systems after the tremendous torque just undergone.

“Daddy, what’s happening”, whimpered Jane’s tiny, frightened voice from the backseat. She began to sob. Jordan started crying as well.

“Kevin? Kevin!”, came Rebecca’s wavering voice. She started to gasp in air, sounding as if she was about to hyperventilate.

Kevin, fumbling to unclasp his seatbelt, turned in his chair to look back at his family. Wide-eyed, tearful faces and trembling ramrod-straight bodies greeted his panicked eyes. The driver’s eyes swept all of them with a mixture of confusion and terror.

In unison the front doors of both vehicles-which they could now see were dark-coloured sedans; not that this was registering in their brains-opened up. Two figures emerged from each direction. All were wearing masks.

“Oh my god-guns Kevin!!”, Rebecca screamed. Jordan and Jane’s sobbing turned to a horrific wail.

“Jesus Christ, drive man!. Go. Go!”, yelled Kevin wide-eyed to the paralyzed driver. Kevin thumped him on the chest in an attempt to break him out of his fear-induced stupor. The driver snapped back and started to fumble with the gearshift but it was too late. One of the men from the front car had reached the driver’s side door and, reaching in through the open window, slammed his right gloved fist powerfully into the driver’s left cheekbone. Almost at the same time his left hand flicked the car into neutral and removed the car keys from the ignition. The driver slumped forward, stunned but conscious. The thug continued, reaching onto the console and plucking the driver’s cell phone

off of it, throwing it to the ground and smashing it with his heavy boot. As this was occurring, both men from the back car had materialized at the passenger door. One of them flung it open while the other aimed his pistol straight at Kevin’s head.

The wailing from the kids subsided back to poorly muffled sobs as the sight of their father at gunpoint put the chaotic situation into a whole new realm. Rebecca repeatedly muttered “Oh my god” as dread swept through her. She practically had her whole upper body in the front seat and was madly clawing at her husband as she stared in disbelief at the gun trained on him.

“You. Come”, came the terse command from the man who had opened the door as the other with the gun flicked it casually toward his own body signalling the obvious direction in which he wanted Kevin to move.

“What do you want”!?! Walker shouted hoarsely. His wife now had both her arms around Kevin’s shoulders, her head now buried in the crook of his neck as she bawled loudly. This set the kids off again and the howling resumed from the back seat.

“I count from three. Three. Two...”

“What do you want!?!”, screamed Kevin again, at a complete loss for any other thought or words.

“One”.

With that, the man with the gun twirled his fire-arm in his hand, and in one motion brought his hand down smashing the butt of his gun onto the side of Kevin’s head. Everyone in the car yelled in complete horror. Kevin went limp in Rebecca’s arms as she let

out another blood-curdling shriek. Jordan was rocking back and forth in his seat unable to take his eyes off what he had just seen. Jane had her head buried in her arms unable to look any longer.

The until-now unseen fourth man grabbed Kevin roughly by the shoulder and hauled him out almost bringing Rebecca with him. The man who had opened the door tried to pry her arms off him and did just that, easily overpowering her as she clutched at air.

The motion seemed to revive Kevin, and although blood poured from the gash in his head, he began to thrash wildly. His strength surprised the man who had a hold of him and they both fell awkwardly to the street with Kevin landing heavily on top of him. Kevin landed a couple of heavy blows to his chest and neck area but the other two men on that side of the car were upon him quickly. Even with Kevin writhing like a snarling dog, they were too much for him with each able to grab one arm and pull him up.

As this was happening Rebecca leapt toward the open door, but the man at the driver's door had a vice-like grip on her hair, his elbow also buried in the driver's throat, preventing any movement out of the car. Meanwhile the thug on the ground scrambled to his feet, calmly reached into his pocket and produced a syringe. Flicking off the cap his menacing eyes looked directly into Kevin's. "You fight. But you *will* give us the codes".

With that he reached for his straining neck and expertly plungered the contents into an unseen vein. The

effect was immediate, his two holders now supporting a deadweight as unconsciousness overcame him.

With a shuffle-gait the captors carried Kevin's dangling form to the front car. Heaving him into the back seat, both got in on either side like he was just sitting there. The man with the gun and syringe got into the driver's seat just as the ruffian who had been holding Rebecca's hair ran to the back vehicle. Both sped off in the direction they were facing leaving only darkness and a shattered family in their violent wake.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Midtown Manhattan, New York City

“**W**e’ve got some tremendous momentum after our strong second quarter. Profits continue to be robust and although we’ve got more than a month to go this quarter, I see no slowdown in performance.”

Jeremy Bennett, CEO and Chairman of America’s third largest bank JP Morgan Chase paused, his owl eyes peering over the top of his spectacles, letting the words sink in. The seven men and one woman seated around the small but opulent boardroom looked back at him expectant for the words he would say next.

Bennett continued: “If the equity markets continue to-”.

Abruptly, a knock at the door cut him off mid-sentence. Bennett looked up with a mixture of disbelief and irritation. This was a man not at all used to being interrupted.

Slowly the door opened and the apologetic eyes of his executive administrative assistant looked into the room.

“Sir, you have a phone call”.

Bennett made no attempt to hide his contempt. “Well, take a message like you always do when I’m in an important meeting”, he snapped. Gloria held her ground. “Sir, you really need to take this call”, she responded evenly looking him directly in the eye.

The bank president looked around the room. Tossing the sheath of papers he was holding onto the boardroom table, he uttered a polite “excuse me a moment please” and quickly exited pulling the door closed behind him.

“This had better be good Gloria”.

“Unfortunately I fear that is not the word for it sir”.

Bennett raised an eyebrow at her, his face now betraying concern as he marched hurriedly into his office and shut the door.

The phone call lasted exactly nine minutes during which time Bennett’s expressions ranged from shock and disbelief to fear and anger to finally settling on acceptance and resolve. When he emerged from his office, he went directly to Gloria and laid a kind hand on her shoulder.

“I should know better than to doubt you. I am sorry for the way I acted back there.” Relief flooded Gloria’s face. He continued gently: “Is Forewell still in the building?”

“No, he left for the evening half an hour ago.”

Bennett looked resigned. “Could you-”

“Sir, since the call came from the commissioner of the French National Police, I have already taken the

liberty of calling Mr. Forewell back to the office with the utmost urgency. He should be here within the next twenty minutes.”

“I’ve always appreciated your ability to read my mind before I’ve even thought of something Gloria”, he said quietly with a smile. “Please have Forewell come directly to the boardroom the minute he arrives. It’s fortunate my executive team is already convened.”

Fifteen minutes later all were again together in the executive boardroom, with the addition of Damon Forewell, Chief of Security for JP Morgan Chase.

“Damon, thank you for getting back here so quickly.” Forewell gave a polite nod and said nothing as he looked on in anticipation.

Bennett’s eyes swept the room and taking a breath he began. “At approximately 10:15pm French local time-or about an hour-and-a-half ago-Kevin Walker, our Vice President of Information Technology, while on vacation, was violently kidnapped right in front of his family in the southern city of Antibes.”

Stunned faces peered back at him. There was no movement. No sound.

“I just got off the phone with Gerard Leroux, Commissaire of the French Police Nationale who called me as a courtesy once he learned of Kevin’s employer and position. He was abducted right out of a taxi by at least four men. There was apparently a struggle and he was hit over the head and injected with something to subdue him. His wife Rebecca and two children Jordan and Jane were unharmed-but they were witness to the

entire event and I can’t for one second imagine the emotional anguish they must be feeling now. The taxi driver was assaulted but his injuries are relatively minor.

“There has not been a ransom demand, but obviously this has just happened so that’s not at all surprising I suppose. The police over there are already mobilized and there is now a massive investigation underway.”

Bennett sagged, suddenly looking a great deal older than his sixty-three years. “I’m really not at all sure what more to say about this.” Still no one moved. There was a long silence as each individual in the room grappled with their own mind to make sense of the shocking, bizarre news they had just heard.

Finally Bennett continued. “I expect there will be a bit of a media component to this and I’ll be summoning our PR people a bit later tonight. They’ll need to be briefed and ready for whatever comes of this.”

Another pause. “Let’s keep Kevin in our thoughts and let’s pray for his safe, quick return”. Bennett’s eyes clouded over as if suddenly broadsided by another thought.

“My God, the family. The kids.” His eyes flashed now and his mouth quivered.

“Who in the hell would take someone’s daddy from right in front of his own kids? Who are these barbarians?” Bennett was practically shouting now, spittle flying from his lips with every word. “They just rip a man away from his family and think they can get away with it. These sonsabitches better be caught. If they harm Walker...” He cut himself off knowing he had no good finish to the sentence he had begun.

“Damon, could you please stay behind”, Bennett asked, his emotions now back in check. “The rest of you, we’re adjourned for the evening. Please keep this under wraps for now, but barring an overnight resolution-and let’s pray for that-this thing will in all likelihood bust wide open in the morning”.

Bennett and Forewell waited impatiently for the others to gather their belongings and exit the room. When the door was closed, the bank president immediately turned to his chief of security.

“What do you make of all this?”

Forewell looked thoughtful. “At first blush it appears to have been well-organized, with quite a bit of planning going into it. Could it have been an opportunistic random group of thugs who did this? I think that’s highly unlikely. The fact they had a syringe with some sort of chemical that immediately knocked him out speaks volumes. First of all, it’s not that easy to come by those types of substances. Second of all, you really need to know what you’re doing when you administer it. No, this group seems to have all the hallmarks of an organization.

“I don’t have all the information obviously so it’s too early to tell whether this was a random thing or whether Walker was an intended target. If it was random, surely there would be far easier marks than a man with three other family members in a moving car with a third-party driver. That is a lot of variables to account for in a crime of opportunity. I think it would be prohibitive.”

“You’re saying he was targeted”, Bennett cut in.

“I’d say it seems that way-though of course I’ve only got your description of events to go on. He paused for a half count. “Do you have any idea why someone would want Walker?”

Bennett did not answer, but instead began again. “There was one other small piece of information that I did not tell the others”.

“Oh?”

“I’m not sure if this has any bearing on things but when the taxi driver was interviewed at the scene just after the police arrived he mentioned that one of the attackers made a reference to Kevin giving them codes.”

“Codes”, repeated Forewell slowly mulling over this new detail. “What codes?”

“That I have no idea. It sounds like a goddam spy novel. Codes. I do not like the sound of that though.”

“We’ll need to figure out what he and his teams were working on to see if there could be any possibility his work is related to his abduction”, interjected Forewell.

“Yes, without a doubt. I will get his second to provide me with a full briefing of all IT activities in the morning”, said Bennett. Looking directly at Forewell, he continued. “As for you Damon, given this possible business ramification, we need to be abreast every step of the way. I would like you to fly over to Antibes and insert yourself as you see fit into this investigation. I’m sure given your CIA background, that won’t be difficult for you to do. I also don’t think you’ll receive much backlash for your presence from the authorities given the profile this thing could assume.

“What do I know of such matters though.” Bennett suddenly looked haggard and worn again. “I’m just a damn banker.”

He suddenly looked up at Forewell. “I know Kevin well. I’ve met his wife and kids on a number of occasions. Business aside, Damon, anything you can do to bring him back unharmed would be...”, Bennett searched for the right word knowing whatever one he chose would be an understatement. He did not finish his sentence.

“I understand sir”. With that Forewell rose and limped toward the door.

“By the way, how is the old leg?”

“Feeling older than it should”, he responded, “but all things considered not too bad”. Pack an umbrella tomorrow though”, he smiled, winking back at his boss.

“Call you when I land.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Antibes, France

Rebecca Walker sat stone-faced, her expressionless eyes boring deep into the inner recesses of oblivion, as she sat on the worn leather couch in the inspecteur general’s office at 5 rue des Freres Olivier. She looked for all the world like someone whose life had been turned upside down and smashed into a million pieces. The skin around her eyes was swollen and red, the rest of her face pale and sallow—a neat trick for someone who had just spent two days basking in tropical sunshine. Her toned, athletic shoulders now just looked feeble and gaunt and they slumped forward as if she didn’t have the muscular strength to sit up straight.

Nestled on either side of her were her children. Both Jordan and Jane had, mercifully, drifted off into uneasy slumber, the torturous events of the previous couple of hours proving to be utterly exhausting. Every now and then one would emit a whimper or a sob betraying the fact that the content of their dreams was anything but childlike. All three had been tucked

underneath one oversized cotton blanket in a futile bid to make the family more comfortable.

Just outside the glassed-in office, the rest of the police station-Antibes' bureau of the Police Nationale was a beehive of activity with both uniformed officers and other men in shirts and ties walking hurriedly and chattering excitedly in their native tongue. Cell phones and walkie talkies clamped to their ears looked to be natural appendages for almost all. Periodically, someone would break stride, tiptoe into the office and cautiously kneel in front of Rebecca to confirm a certain detail or ask a quick question.

It had been nearly two hours since Kevin Walker had been brutally kidnapped in front of his own family. In the immediate aftermath it had taken a good three or four minutes for any cars to even drive by and those that did simply swerved around the prone taxi. Neither the Walker's smart phones left in their hotel rooms nor the taxi driver's smashed mobile were of any use on this night.

The driver recovered from his shock first and with his frantic waving managed to get the next car to stop. And from there things moved very quickly. The passing motorist summoned the police on her cell phone and within ten minutes two patrol cars were on scene, the gravity of the situation immediately apparent to the attending officers. Inspectors, back-up constables, a forensic crew and an ambulance were quickly dispatched to the crime scene, the area cordoned off. After initial questioning and some brief medical attention the party of four from the stricken taxi was rushed under armed escort to the police station.

To the Walker family it was all a blur as their emotions collectively ranged from utter shock to utter hysteria and back again with very little in between. But important details were learned, and the events of those critical minutes were pieced together by some very patient detectives. The taxi driver also, while clearly devastated, provided much useful detail, his arms-length emotional relationship to the Walker's obviously enabling his mind to clear more quickly.

Calls went out. More inspectors were summoned. Roadblocks were erected. A phalanx of officers were put on patrol.

The investigation had begun.

Havana, Cuba

The early evening sun glowed a striking hue of orange as it angled down toward the far-off horizon. The fragrant air had, only an hour or two ago, lost its searing heat and was now simply a skin-embracing gorgeous warmth. Another beautiful Caribbean night was shaping up in the Cuban capital.

The main streets of La Habana Vieja-Old Havana-were busy with both pedestrian and vehicular traffic alike. Honking horns and shouts filled the air. Salsa music wafted from many of the restaurants that catered to the tourists. These pleasant sounds were mixed with the more aggressive beats of the numerous bars and clubs that also lined the major thoroughfares. Fifties-era American automobiles-'los maquinas'-were parked tightly on either side of the

street, a stark symbol of the rollicking good times of pre-Communist Cuba. And with this energetic backdrop you could, at least on the surface, make the case that it had never really ended.

A few blocks removed from this pulsating human cacophony the 'real' Old Havana existed. There was still the pervasive Latino vibe, the streets were still busy and the smiling, seemingly cheerful residents were either scurrying about or simply hanging out and sitting on their front stoops in families or groups.

There was also the unmistakable aura of real poverty. It wasn't the inhabitants that gave it away-many were dressed nicely and took pride in their appearance. It wasn't like there were winos on every corner either. They were in fact hard to even spot. It also wasn't necessarily the houses, though they were certainly an indicator. Looking closely you could easily make out the scars of time and the fact that repairs and upkeep were barely happening, if at all.

No, looking at the many street scenes of residential Old Havana, it was simply the intuition that a third-party observer instantly recognized. The smiling faces-but not quite happiness. The expressiveness of the eyes-but the blankness behind them that betrayed the fact this was their life for as long as they lived. Poverty. Yes, the people had many institutional needs taken care of by the state, but they were systemically destined for poverty. It was happiness recalibrated. Even with the economic reforms sweeping the island nation, the opportunities still seemed few and far between for the average Cuban. This was their life: day-to-day existence

was tolerable for most but there was really nothing to ever strive for.

The villa on Obrapia in the heart of Old Havana stuck out like a sore thumb amidst the crumbling splendour of the surrounding residences. Much larger than any of its neighbours, it also differed in one other crucial way: it was completely restored and updated. Palatial balconies wrapped around the second floor and were held up by impressive white stone pillars. The powder blue limestone exterior at least fit in with the colour schemes around it, but the walls were spotless with not so much as even one chip visible.

Soft salsa music drifted out from behind slightly billowing curtains. Inside the house a mildly obese man was dancing a few abstract rumba steps by himself, caught in a moment where the music seems to orchestrate the body's movements by itself. Surprisingly nimble and light on his feet, the man paused from his movements only to take a substantial gulp of the Cuban rum poured over ice in the glass he was holding. A woman sashayed into the spacious living room glass of red wine in hand and took hold of the man's hand. They danced. They shared a kiss. Truly, this looked like a somewhat intoxicated scene of contentment.

The telephone rang. Instantly the man sprang to attention and put his drink down on the coffee table. He turned down the music so it could barely be heard. Snapping up the cordless phone out of its cradle, he pushed the 'Talk' button.

"Yes".

“Phase one of the project has been completed”, came the voice at the other end of the line.

“That is excellent news. You have done very well my friend”.

“It is an honour. We would not let you down”.

“Call me when phase two is completed”, commanded the obese man.

“We will of course”.

“Very well. Goodbye.” With that both ends of the line hung up simultaneously.

The man looked over to the woman who had seated herself on the couch for the duration of the short conversation. He broke into a broad grin and extended his hand to her. She took it eagerly as he turned the music back up to its previous volume. They began to dance again, their bodies entwined, eyes alive, smiling deeply at one another.

## CHAPTER SIX

Autostrada dei Fiori on the border of France and Italy

The main highway joining the French Riviera with Italy’s Ligurian coast was far from busy at this late hour. A few cars came and went in each direction slowing for the toll booths at the checkpoint, before picking up speed again upon being waved on through the border area. As a result of the Schengen Treaty among many of the countries in the European Union, border checks were virtually non-existent. Only suspicious looking vehicles were subjected to any sort of passport check and these occurrences were indeed a rarity. The crossing between France and Italy on the Autostrada was no different.

The four men seated in the late model Audi sedan looked intently toward the concentration of lights ahead in the distance. A quick stop at the toll booth would be immediately followed by the continuation of their journey. Each exchanged confident yet intense looks, their trust in one another pure, focus on the task at hand resolute. Earlier, muted conversation had

subsided as this necessary brush with authority lay just ahead of them.

Ever since they had taken their captive on the darkened stretch of road between Antibes and Juan-Les-Pins, it had been a steady drive east. After quickly ditching one of their vehicles the five of them had worked their way through the streets of Antibes. No alarm bells had been raised—something that had been counted on—evidenced by the fact that they had passed the odd police car lazily patrolling the calm streets. Upon leaving the city limits, it was a short jaunt to La Provencale, France's side of the main autoroute.

Once on the highway, they had calmly driven at just over the speed limit, efficiently churning up the miles, but not so fast as to draw any unwanted attention to themselves. The name of the game was fitting in and remaining inconspicuous. The name of the game was also getting across the border quickly.

The kidnappers were under no illusion that a coordinated law enforcement effort would not happen quickly between the Police Nationale and the French Gendarmerie. And there was no doubt that the Italian authorities would be alerted given the proximity of the border to the crime scene. However, they also knew that coordination would be severely compromised between the two countries' separate forces, especially so soon after the offence had happened.

With the toll booth less than a hundred feet away, the late model Audi slowed to a crawl. There were three

cars lined up in front, the first of these paying the toll and being waved on through.

Suddenly, the radio on the hip of the border guard crackled to life. He pulled it out of its holster and after a few seconds of listening was instantly at attention, nodding intermittently and muttering a few words of Italian back into the mouthpiece. Within seconds he was out of his booth. Extending his palm toward the first car in an obvious signal to stop, he approached the driver's side window. The driver obediently rolled down the window and after a few words back and forth the guard shone his flashlight throughout the interior of the car.

The Audi by now had rolled to a stop and the four men inside exchanged concerned glances. There were some terse words among them in a foreign tongue and a few curt nods of the head but otherwise there was very little reaction to the development just a few car lengths ahead.

The guard, meanwhile, had opened one of the back doors to the first car and was again shining his light throughout the backseat. The search was definitely on and the border patrol was obviously taking no chances. By now three more cars had come to a stop behind the Audi, the prolonged search now taking any sort of precedence over the smooth flow of traffic between France and Italy.

Seemingly out of nowhere another guard appeared, patting the first on the shoulder to signal his arrival. A bead of sweat started to slowly roll down the right temple of the driver of the Audi, his face now etched



with worry. Visibly, the others stiffened as well, jaws taut, backs straight.

The trunk was now popped on the lead car and the second guard was busy feeling around and examining its contents. Bending inside he moved a few things around, picked up a few articles and methodically replaced them. After a few moments he stood up straight again, obviously satisfied things were how they should be. Closing it down, he gibbered something to his partner in Italian. The other responded with a few quick words and shut the back door. With an airy wave to the driver and a cheerful farewell, he let the searched car pass into Italy.

The Audi inched forward in the line-up that much closer to the inevitable search. The car in front of them moved up and took its place under the bright floodlights of the toll area. There appeared to be two people in this car, a beaten Peugeot. Again, the two guards worked in tandem, the first again talking to the driver, the other, now on hand for the entire search, opening the back door and shining his flashlight inside. After some words with both the driver and his passenger, the car was turned off and the keys handed over. The Peugeot, evidently had to have its trunk opened with a key. After a similar search as the first, the car was deemed suitable for entry and it rattled off into the night.

The late model Audi containing the four men now rolled quietly forward into the search area.

Rolling down his window and in perfect Italian, the driver inquired: "Hello officer. Is there something going on tonight?"

In the same language, the guard responded: "Yes, we will need to do a quick search of your car." Peering in, he looked at the swarthy faces of all four men and continued: "Where are you all going together at this late hour?"

"To Milano".

"And what is your purpose in going to Milano?" The other guard, also vigilant at the sight of four men driving together at this hour, had come up to the front passenger door and was eyeing the occupants with suspicion.

"We are going home".

"Where were you and how long were you in France?"

"We were in Nice for two nights, enjoying the night-clubs. But now, we are out of money". He broke into a broad sheepish grin. "We go home to work again".

"Passports please", said the lead guard obviously unimpressed.

The driver collected all four and handed them over. He began studying them in turn occasionally looking up and shining his flashlight into the car to ensure faces matched pictures.

"Open your doors", said the second guard.

All four doors were opened and he searched around the floor area of both the front and back.

"Your car is very clean for a bunch of party guys", said the first guard handing the passports back to the driver.

"What can I say, I don't like a mess in my car. These guys know that". All four smiled at this comment.

"Pop your trunk now please", commanded the first guard impassively.

With an audible click, the trunk rose swiftly. The first guard walked to the back and peered in. The only article visible was a blanket which was covering the entire expanse of the trunk. There was very clearly something big underneath it.

The guard looked up toward the front of the car. Then he looked behind himself. The second guard was still completing his search of the interior of the sedan. Slowly, he peeled back the corner of the blanket. A shock of dark hair was revealed. The guard again looked toward his partner who was now engaged in some sort of conversation with the vehicle's occupants. He again cautiously shed more of the blanket. Kevin Walker's unconscious face came into view, dried blood caking his cheek. His eyes were shut tightly, face expressionless. The guard looked down at him, pausing to get a good look.

The second guard was now standing up again looking toward the trunk.

"We are all clear up front", he volunteered in Italian. "And you?"

Carefully replacing the blanket, he responded: "Yes, there is nothing back here".

Slamming the trunk shut, he walked back to the driver. "You may go now. Drive safely". He fixed an intense gaze on the driver that lasted just a half count longer than normal.

"Thank you. We will". He casually broke eye contact with the guard and put the car into gear. The engine hummed and the Audi slowly rolled across the border, gathering speed as it drove on into the night.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

LaGuardia Airport, New York City

**D**amon Forewell, Chief of Security for JP Morgan Chase walked hurriedly across the tarmac shielding his face from the steady rain that had begun to fall about an hour ago. It was now nearly ten o'clock at night on the eastern seaboard of the United States and much had happened since the news had broken. Forewell had immediately gone home and packed his suitcase. This seemingly simple task was compounded by the unknown quantity called duration. How long would this trip to France last? A few days? A few weeks perhaps?

Calls to the bank's Paris office had also been made. Except it wasn't exactly to the office. Key personnel were awakened at their homes and in their beds, shocked silence at the other end of the line the unanimous reaction in every case.

Forewell spent the most time on the line with the company's French security director, Charles Baptiste. Arrangements were made to meet up in Antibes the moment Forewell landed in the Riviera. Baptiste would

undoubtedly prove valuable in his home country. Any language issues would become a non-factor but aside from this his working knowledge of both arms of French law enforcement would be helpful as well. Both the Police Nationale and the Gendarmerie Nationale, while certainly coordinated, had differences in protocols and techniques. Baptiste had the local market knowledge of how best to integrate JP's interests into the investigation. That is, Forewell thought, if Walker was still in France. The possibility of quickly leaving France undetected by water, road, or less possibly air gnawed at him greatly.

Jeremy Bennett had also done his part to get as much information as quickly as possible. He had interrupted many a dinner or after work drink to mobilize Walker's Information Technology department. The top managers had all come back to the office to pull all documentation on what programs and activities were either on-going or recently completed. A full brief would be on Bennett's desk before he walked back in the door at seven in the morning.

Public Relations had also been briefed by Bennett. This whole thing had been such a bizarre, unfathomable event it was difficult to figure exactly what turns it would take in the public eye. Any number of scenarios could easily unfold and it was absolutely possible that if the abduction had something to do with the bank's business, shareholder confidence could be eroded. As hard as it was to think in those terms with a man's life at stake and the rest of his family in agony, it had to be addressed. Dissemination of information and how stakeholders

perceived any risks to the business would be critical. Of course, the incident could have nothing to do with the bank but all eventualities needed to be planned for.

Forewell lifted his suitcase off the tarmac and slung his computer bag over his right shoulder ascending the steps to the waiting Gulfstream IV. The company jet had been recalled hurriedly from Charlotte, North Carolina leaving four bank executives to find their own transportation back to New York City after their meetings had been concluded.

The lone flight attendant was busy ensuring the passenger cab was prepared and a tanker trunk was nearly done fuelling the jet for the trans-Atlantic flight. The pilot and co-pilot were going through final cockpit checks; the plane would be departing within the next fifteen minutes.

Everyone else was already seated as Forewell stowed his baggage in the luggage hold. At this trying time the company had called both Kevin's and Rebecca's respective families to offer up a seat on the company jet. He knew this would be a tough flight as nerves were extremely raw. Privately, he wished the family members were not on board-that this would be strictly business, not the humanitarian mission it was sure to be. He also knew this was impossible; the unbelievable events that had taken place were all about emotion.

Forewell's eyes swept the cabin as he made his way toward an open seat. He had been fully briefed on who would be aboard, first impressions of the company's reaction to this tragedy extremely important.

Stooping low, he quietly, grimly greeted Rebecca's younger sister. Madeline Young had hurriedly driven down from Connecticut, her only impulse being to rush to her sister's side and help out wherever she could with her nephew and niece. Damon expressed his concerns, whispered a few optimistic words and gave her as reassuring a hug as possible.

A firm, determined handshake acknowledged Tim Walker. Kevin's eldest brother was clearly showing the strains of the past few hours. Eyes brimming with tears, he reached out and embraced Damon tightly. Yes, this was no ordinary mission; the detached, cold emotion would need to be put on hold, at least for the duration of the flight.

JP Morgan Chase had also quickly arranged for a grief counsellor to help out the Walker family in their time of dire need. *Great touch*, thought Forewell to himself as he smartly introduced himself to psychologist Fiona Chalmers. Chalmers had gained a certain notoriety within her field for her fervent, impassioned work in the months and years following the horrific events of September 11, 2001. He spent a good two or three minutes speaking quietly to her before finally settling into his seat.

As the Gulfstream gracefully launched itself into the dark night sky, Manhattan's dizzying light show growing smaller by the second, Forewell settled comfortably into his luxurious leather chair. Normally a flight on the company jet would be quickly accompanied by his favourite Canadian or Belgian beer-but not this one. A

bit of sleep and a clear head were the only acceptable results of this trans-Atlantic journey.

Despite the circumstances, Forewell couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement rush through his body. In fact, thought Forewell somewhat guiltily, these circumstances paled severely in comparison to some of the hell-holes he had been asked to infiltrate in the name of American national security. His life wasn't in danger; that was certainly a first. And he wasn't even actually accountable to the case; the French investigators bore the brunt of these considerable expectations.

Still, this *was* a mission. It may not have been Moscow, Barcelona or Istanbul-just a fraction of the locales where Forewell had plied his considerable intelligence skills. But it was certainly more exciting, if that word could be used, than Omaha, Dallas or Portland-just a few of the cities where he had investigated desperate white-collar criminals.

Forewell could have never imagined that his life would have taken this turn. Growing up in the Washington, DC area, all he had ever wanted to do was serve his country. He felt that he could smell the fragrance of power wafting through the District of Columbia air, the highest annals of government and military quite literally at his doorstep during his formative years.

And while he did not necessarily want a piece of that power, he certainly felt his calling was to ensure that he served his nation in a manner that helped America keep its power position in the world. But

Forewell did not have the 'rah rah' type of patriotic fervour that many around him had. No, his was more of an introspective view of his country's place in the world: a powerful presence to be sure-but not the *only* presence. Sometimes this perspective seemed to be lost in an increasingly complicated and violent world.

This perspective would lead a young Damon to enrol in the political science program at Georgetown University. Flourishing under the well-rounded insights of his accomplished professors, his view on world politics would become further galvanized. There was a big wide world out there that did not view the United States as the sun and all other countries revolved around it like so many planets. Instead, the world, Forewell came to understand, was a complex mix of races, religions, political ideologies and cultures messily packaged into numerous nations.

This diversity both fascinated and frightened Damon as he worked his way through his degree program. It was no wonder that violence had been a staple of mankind from the beginning of time. Why did humans feel the need to kill each other in the name of their own beliefs? Humans, he thought, intrinsically needed to command power and the loss of this power brought only feelings of vulnerability and impotence. This could be tolerated for only so long before something would have to be done. A battle of wills would ensue and the imposition of one's will on another was sure to bring conflict.

That is why the world scared Damon. These battles for power and imposition of wills and beliefs would be

tolerant if only they were on a small scale. This was of course not the case. World conflicts inevitably involved millions of people swept up, whether they wanted to be or not, in political, religious or cultural strife. And they were not simply clashes, but fundamental beliefs that fuelled the violence and all-consuming need for power. One had to look no further than the Rwandan atrocities or the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to know that these were not isolated incidents. They were simply an on-going, terrifying struggle for control that would always mark humans' time on this planet.

Forewell wound up completing his degree in three-and-a-half years rather than the standard four-the quickened pace due as much to his thirst for knowledge as it was his impatience to begin turning his perspective into useful action. He wanted to not only serve his country-he wanted to help the world.

These thoughts he kept to himself; indeed who would listen to such grand ideas from someone who had barely any real-world experience? A political science degree? How many thousands of students graduated that very year with the exact same qualifications?

But Damon felt his path to be different and with quiet resolve Forewell plotted out how best to go about helping the world.

The military was his first stop out of Georgetown. Yes, this was certainly an oxymoronic choice to, say the least, for someone who was conscientious to the causes of violence and conflict throughout the world. He would after all be handed a gun should his training meet with success.

To young Damon's thinking though, what other choice was there? How could one possibly understand armed conflict and how humans reacted under such intense life-threatening stress, if time was not taken to *live* these experiences? Time in the proverbial, and likely literal, trenches was a completely necessary endeavour.

He had always found a perverse humour in policy-makers who were helping to shape world views through their ideologies that had never put their own necks on the line. How would they know how others felt when confronted with desperation and the spectre of facing the ultimate sacrifice never too far away?

Forewell chose the Marines for the sole reason that he thought this arm of the U.S. military had the toughest training. A physical, emotional and mental battle was what he sought. So off to Parris Island, South Carolina he went to begin Marine Corps basic training.

The quiet resolve that marked Damon's time in university quickly rose to the forefront at Parris Island. His intellectual skills were superior-and this went so far beyond the fact he possessed a university degree, a rarity among his classmates. Tests of aptitude and recall yielded results off the charts. Just as importantly, the sheer talent and physical ability he displayed in all training exercises soon separated him from his training brethren. Forewell practically devoured obstacle courses, feats of strength and tests of marksmanship.

It was no surprise then that Damon finished his training at the top of his class and perhaps more importantly gained significant recognition from top military brass before he had even become a full-fledged Marine.

Quite literally the day after graduation Damon was summoned from his barrack while clearing out his belongings. Something was certainly amiss as he walked into the room as there were two people he had never seen before looking quite stern and important.

But the veneer soon cracked and the first individual broke into a broad grin: "Damon Forewell, you have created quite a stir here. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Stephen Vance. I am the Assistant Director of Intelligence at the Central Intelligence Agency. This is Valerie Noonan, Recruitment Director. She gave a curt nod and smiled professionally.

Forewell remained silent, the regimented behaviours and protocol of the previous months still firmly entrenched in his mind.

Vance continued: "Your performance here at Parris Island has-and I don't throw these terms around easily-been nothing short of sensational. Your scores are in the top percentile. That is impressive."

Forewell continued to sit impassively.

"Marine, what do you want to do?"

"Sir?"

"What is it that you aspire to?"

Damon looked quizzically at the Director of Intelligence, but his mind was working quickly. Such an open-ended question called for the careful choice of words in his response. Damon simply answered truthfully.

"I really just want to serve my country. I want to put my training and skills to good use and I want to do this

quickly.” His demeanour remained passive but his eyes bore intensely into those of Stephen Vance.

“Quickly huh?”

“Ideally sir”.

“What if I told you that you could be serving on a real mission in one month time as a special agent with the CIA?”

“I would say I’d be quite surprised as I’m currently a United States Marine.”

“Loyalty. That is admirable”.

“Sir, it’s not as much about loyalty as it is about having just gone through significant physical and mental challenges . . .”

“With barely breaking a sweat from what we can tell”, Vance cut him off.

Damon relaxed slightly in his chair. “Your words are appreciated but I assure you, much sweat was shed to get through my training. May I ask what the mission is?”

“No, you may not. You must accept first and only then will the details emerge-and only as you need to know them. But rest assured, this will do more for your development than beginning at the bottom of the Marine food chain. We know you would have a long, distinguished military career. That is already written. What I’m offering you is the chance to further your training right now-but it’s not just training. It is one hundred percent real and will involve the preservation of American national security. It will not be a drill soldier.”

Damon thought for a moment. But how do I just leave the Marine Corps?”

“That’s the first idiotic thing you’ve said in months. Do you think I’d be sitting here if I wasn’t prepared to leave right here, right now with you. Those details are left with me and not your concern.”

Silence filled the room for ten seconds. This was followed simply by: “I’m in”.

Damon Forewell’s distinguished career in the CIA would begin just outside El Valle, Panama ferreting out and eventually hunting down a suspected major arms dealer supplying the Central American and southern U.S. drug trade. This was nothing less than baptism by fire as the ruthless nature of their prey left very little room for error.

The assignment was no accident. ‘Let’s see what the kid can do’ might as well have been the mantra. And ‘the kid’ did alright-actually more than alright. He and three other highly trained operatives spent days surveying the routines and personnel of their foes. Patience and vigilance were of the utmost importance. Forewell spent entire days not moving a muscle while blending into the jungle undergrowth like a stationary iguana. He had no preconceived notion of the glamorous, if entirely false, lifestyle of an international spy. Even as his muscles ached from his prolonged, precarious position he could not have been happier.

In the brief moments that allowed for the slightest degree of introspection, he knew he had found his calling. The work was intense, exhausting and incredibly dangerous-and he loved it all. The mix of intellectual necessity and flat-out physical skill was what he most

enjoyed-and it was simply second nature to him. Vance had been absolutely right in his assessment.

As tactical plans were debated and drawn up, Forewell played a major role in deciding many of the actions that should be undertaken. Even among agents with many years of seniority and vast amounts of field know-how, he was quickly accepted and his opinions were taken seriously and included. Lives were at risk, and by default, quality rose to the forefront in these scenarios.

The operation was carried out with incredible success by the team of CIA special agents. They knew there would be bloodshed-it was only a matter of whose lives would end. Under the cover of night the team executed their carefully drawn up infiltration and attack plans to perfection. The whole operation lasted just minutes. The CIA's bullets were few and found their marks with deadly accuracy; the Central Americans' shells were numerous and sprayed indiscriminately at unseen targets.

Damon Forewell made the first and second kills of his life that night. It took only two shots. He knew this day would come, he just did not expect it to happen so quickly. It was not until he retreated to the safe zone after all the fireworks had ended that he even reflected on this occurrence. He felt oddly calm, though the butterflies in his stomach reminded him that he had been the sole reason that another man's life had been terminated. In the heat of the operation he had not even hesitated, as the brutal choreography guided his actions like a ballet dancer who has trained for months

for one perfect routine. He allowed for some self-congratulation for his composure and flawless execution under the duress of an intense operation-but also he knew that it had come very easily to him.

That night, a star in the Central Intelligence Agency had been born.

Forewell grinned slightly at this pleasant and bloody memory as the Gulfstream IV flew quietly somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. He looked around the darkened interior of the aircraft. Everyone was either sleeping or absorbed in their own thoughts. The cabin was in complete silence, broken only by the gentle hum of powerful jet engines efficiently operating at cruising altitude.

*Dammit, what the hell am I even doing here?* he thought to himself, grin turning abruptly to frown. Forewell sagged a bit in the luxurious leather chair and his eyes focused on nothing a hundred miles away. *One bullet. One goddam bullet.* He exhaled heavily and shook his head almost imperceptibly as if trying to rid himself of the powerful memory that was now dominating his mind.

For a dozen years, Forewell had served in and led covert intelligence missions all over the world. His success rate was astounding and his penchant for developing detailed operational plans-usually in the face of imperfect information-was the stuff of legend in the intelligence field.

Lisbon, Portugal on New Year's Day of 2008 changed everything. Even for winter in the normally



temperate Portuguese capital, it was unseasonably cool. It was one of those steel grey days where the rain was relentless and the damp, cold air fought its way into the very marrow of one's bones. Forewell and another agent had been tracking a rogue former Soviet spy named Maksim Drotentkov who was suspected of selling top secret American intelligence to a certain terrorist organization.

Curiously, Drotentkov had an almost religious infatuation with the haunting melodies of Portuguese Fado music. Not well known in North America, and barely exhibited outside of Lisbon, the distinctive operatic verse and dual guitar exhibitions were strange bedfellows for anyone of Russian descent. Somewhere along the way, he had fallen in love with the music and had even bought a residence in central Lisbon to sate his aural needs. He was known to spend hours in a rapt, trancelike state as he allowed the emotion of the harmony to wash over him, applauding wildly at the end of each performance. It was this connection that would be exploited in the name of national security.

As Forewell hunkered down fifty yards from the entrance to Café Luso-a favoured Fado haunt of Drotentkov's-he carefully fingered the trigger to his powerful subsonic sniper rifle. The rogue was known to frequent this restaurant at least a couple of times a week and it was just a matter of waiting for him to show. As missions went, this was operationally very simple.

His partner Samson was stationed on another rooftop forty yards to his left and these positions created almost a perfect triangle of fire with the drinking

establishment. Forewell continued to scan the front entrance and-*what the hell was going on!!*. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement on his partner's roof. There should be no movement at all. With alarm, he wrenched his eye from the scope and grabbed his binoculars, quickly training them toward the anomaly. *Jesus, there's a fight going on. What had happened?!*

Samson had been discovered! What followed next was a blur as the Russian and his entourage exited the bar at that very moment. Drotentkov and his men became alerted to the commotion, and taking a couple of seconds to process the interruption, honed in also on Forewell. There was nothing to do but abandon his position and get the hell out of there as one of the Russian henchmen sprinted toward the building he was perched upon. He had to get down or he would be a sitting duck holed up on the roof!

By the time he hit street-level, Forewell had a half block head start-not much of a cushion-but had faced this scenario countless times before in urban warfare. He began to zigzag back and forth across the alley as he continued his full-out sprint, all the while firing behind himself indiscriminately hoping this would slow the gunman down. Bullets were pockmarking the brick buildings beside him in the narrow alley, puffs of masonry dust exploding in the air. With just yards to go until the end of the block where he could safely dive around the corner, searing pain ripped through his right lower leg. *No, it couldn't be. He had been hit!?!?*

Forewell crawled on his forearms around the corner of the building and immediately swivelled to peer

back at his attacker. The Russian now realized in his haste to track his mark down that he had left himself exposed. There was little cover and Forewell picked him off easily with a tap to the forehead and one center chest. The immediate threat was over, but at what cost?

He knew it was bad but nothing could prepare him for the sight that greeted him as he carefully lifted his pant leg. The bullet had snapped both his tibia and the smaller fibula right in half and his lower leg now rested in a grotesque angle against the sidewalk. He vomited twice and fought to keep consciousness. His head was spinning and he was in more pain than he had ever experienced.

Damon Forewell escaped with his life that day, but had he really? After multiple operations, it was determined he would forever walk with a limp. He could never serve in the field again-there would be too much risk to his life and those of his fellow agents. It was a crushing blow to a man who thrived on the action and intensity just as much as the intellectual battle that inevitably determined success or failure against the enemy. *Had he underestimated his opponent, or was he the victim of incredibly bad luck?* It was in fact the building supervisor who had to stay late to fix a ventilation issue on Samson's roof. He had stumbled upon a gunman and raised holy hell!

No one at the CIA blamed him for what had happened-not even privately. His legend, his preparation in all his years had earned him that right. Forewell was

given a plumb desk job-a promotion-and all seemed well. Except for the fact it was a *desk job*.

He could barely stand the fact that he was stuck at a desk when his fellow agents were out in the field making it happen. He grew disenchanting with his situation; so close to the action, yet so incredibly far away.

Two years later, Wall Street came beckoning. The high salary with bonuses on top were certainly an enticement, but it was the current environment of feeling impotent every day that really drove Forewell to leave the Central Intelligence Agency. It was the hardest decision of his life, but it was also the easiest as well.

And now, here he was: catching white collar criminals-with this unexpected, yet strangely exciting 'mission' about to begin...