

A CHRISTIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

THE HIDDEN SABOTEUR



CHARLES BESONDY

The Hidden Saboteur

Charles Besondy

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Edited by Steve Statham
StathamCommunications.com

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Published by Charles Besondy, 113 Firebird Street, Lakeway, TX, 78734 USA
Visit CharlesBesondy.com

For Sofy.

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PART ONE,
THE CALL.

CHAPTER 1

The noise inside the dark room was unlike anything Clay had ever experienced. It was a muffled shrieking. No, not a shriek, more of an amplified hiss with the occasional scream of some lost soul. He told himself the sound was just the gale-force wind and rain that lashed the tower. That knowledge was of little comfort because he was standing alone inside the dark tower and that darn noise sounded evil.

Clay had to admit; he was spooked. He shivered uncontrollably. The fear felt like a large spider under his shirt inching its way up his back. His first instinct was to run.

Yeah, why not get the heck out of here? Just turn around, open the steel door and leave this darn place. Go back to the house. Light a fire. Open a beer. Turn on the TV. But he knew he had a job to do. It was going to be a long night.

He had a job all right. He looked up. The beam from his flashlight caught the reflections of the metal stairs as they wound upward into the never-ending darkness, but could pierce the gloom only so far. After fifty feet the black overcame the white of the light. Didn't matter. Clay knew what was above. As the hissing sound of the wind rose another octave, he started the climb.

High above Clay, 117 feet from the ground floor, with a terrible storm raging outside, the unthinkable had happened—the lighthouse lantern had gone out.

Flashlight in one hand, canvas tool box in the other, he took the first step. One down, 186 steps to go.

Climbing the 187 steps to the top of the lighthouse was something Clay had done many times before. He knew (because he measured once) each step was seven inches higher than the

previous step. Every sixteen steps there was a small landing. At every second landing, the lighthouse's architect had thoughtfully placed a small window to let some light into the tower's interior during the day. There wasn't even moonlight coming through the windows on this forbidding night.

Clay paused on the second landing. He was already a little short of breath. He looked up. There was only darkness, not even a hint of a shape or an object, just emptiness. He climbed upward, one seven-inch step at a time.

The climb was harder tonight. Sure, the darkness and devilish-sounding wind were tough on the nerves, but the climb was physically harder, too. Both of his hands were occupied. In the left, he held the heavy-duty flashlight. His right hand carried the tools he'd need later. No hands were available to grasp the metal railing and help pull his weight up the stairs. *Note to self, next time put the tools in a backpack*, he thought. Would there be a next time?

At the fourth landing, the perspiration on his forehead began to drip down his face. By the tenth landing Clay was breathing hard. His t-shirt and flannel shirt were soaked with sweat. His light caught the red number 10 stenciled on the wall. Halfway. "The point of no return," he whispered jokingly to himself. He was 59 feet off the ground and had another 58 feet to climb. It was a blessing that he couldn't see the floor far below in the darkness, even if he wanted to. He didn't want to think about falling.

For the next thirty minutes, he slowly climbed, resting at each landing to catch his breath, before moving on.

Finally, the stairs stopped at the larger landing. He had reached the top of the staircase. The diameter of the tower was at its narrowest here, just twenty feet across. Now he had to climb an eight-foot steel ladder and pull himself through a steel hatch into the lantern compartment.

This was going to be dicey. How was he going to climb a ladder in the pitch dark when both hands were occupied? *Two trips, that's it. I'll go up with just the flashlight first. Then a second trip with the tools*, he concluded.

He set the toolbox next to the base of the ladder so that he could find it easily in the dark. Then, grasping the flashlight in one

hand, he slowly climbed the ladder. The right hand gripped the ladder, while the left hand held the light. For extra stability, he hooked his left elbow around the ladder's steps as he ascended. Up he went.

The hatch was another problem. It was heavy. Holding himself on the ladder with his hooked left elbow, he pressed his right shoulder and right hand against the hatch. It inched upward. By straightening his body a little, the hatch opened a few more inches. Carefully he moved his feet up one more rung on the ladder and with his shoulders was able to swing the hatch further open. Two more steps and Clay was able to crawl through the hatch. He laid exhausted on the floor, looking up. He was surrounded by thick panes of glass. The sound of the wind and rain was terrifying up here without the insulation of the thick masonry walls. Could he actually feel the tower swaying in the wind, or was that just the hard beating of his heart?

Whatever, he wanted nothing more than to do what had to be done and get out.

Now for the tools. Clay set the flashlight on the floor, so its beam shined across the open hatch. Then he eased himself down through the hatch and onto the ladder. Feeling his way down, his left foot finally met the floor. Even with the light beam above it was almost totally dark here. He felt around for the toolbox at the base of the ladder. *Got it.* Clay picked up the canvas tool bag and started to climb back up the ladder. But a large screwdriver in a side pocket caught on the ladder step and flipped out of the bag as if some invisible hand had grabbed it from the pocket and thrown it aside. Clay heard something clang against the metal floor twice, then silence. Feeling around the pockets of the tool carrier, everything was in order except—*no, not that!* He couldn't feel a long Phillips screwdriver. It was the first tool he had put into the carrier that night. It was his favorite tool because its length made it possible to reach a few of the screws on the lens cover. He needed that screwdriver.

Cursing his luck, he got onto his hands and knees in the inky darkness and searched the entire floor like a blind man looking for his shoe. It was unnerving crawling around on the floor knowing that in the darkness the only thing separating him from falling 116 feet

straight down to his death, was two rows of chains protecting the edges of the final landing.

Back and forth he crawled around the landing feeling for the screwdriver. Several times his hands felt the edge of the landing just as his head touched the protective chain. Each time he recoiled as if he had touched a live wire and pulled back away from the edge.

His frustration was growing by the second. *I need that screwdriver, and I don't want to be up here all night! This is crazy, he thought, it has to be here. Where else could it be?* He tried to visualize the screwdriver's flight path after leaving the tool carrier. No good. Did it flip forward, backward or to the left? No way of knowing. While feeling around the dark, cold, metal floor, he replayed the event in his mind—the resistance he felt as the screwdriver caught on the ladder, the sudden release, then the sound—clank, clank. The screwdriver had hit the floor, bounced, and hit it again. Two clanks then silence. *It has to be here, where else could it go? Oh, no!* The answer hit him. Sitting on the floor at the base of the ladder in darkness, he realized what had happened. The twelve-inch Phillips screwdriver had flipped out of the carrier with a lot of force, bounced twice on the metal floor, and sailed over the edge to the floor 117 feet below.

He didn't know how he was going to repair the light without that screwdriver, but he had to try. And fast.

Clay, with the tool carrier, climbed up the ladder and back into the lantern room. He grabbed the flashlight and scanned the floor in the ladder room below just to be sure. Nothing. The floor was empty. Bye-bye screwdriver.

Standing up in the lantern room he paused to collect himself. He took a long drink from the bottle of water in the tool carrier, wiped the sweat from around his eyes and looked out into the night.

On a beautiful clear day, this was an exhilarating place to be, high above the rocks and waves with an unobstructed view all the way to the horizon. But tonight was a different story. The lighthouse was being assaulted. The wind and rain lashed the thick glass panes with evil fury. The noise was deafening. It reminded Clay of that summer he worked in a truck garage. Just about every day he was asked to steam clean truck parts before they were replaced on the

trucks. The sound of that high-pressure water hitting the metal—that's the intensity of the noise he heard now all around him.

He noticed that his hands were shaking. He took another sip of water, replaced the bottle in the carrier, and glanced out the window one last time before getting to work.

Was that a light out there? He couldn't be sure. The rain was slamming against the windows and blurring everything. There it was again. A flicker, nothing, another flicker. Was it his spooked imagination or did he see a ship's light out at sea? He grabbed the flashlight and turned it off so there wouldn't be any reflection off the glass. He strained to see through the torrents of rain and dark.

There! No question. A light far off the point. He couldn't see the vessel. Just the white light, either a masthead light or stern light, he thought. Was the ship coming into the bay, or leaving? Who in their right mind would be leaving port on a night like this? Another light flickered. Red. The white and red lights were relatively close together. Clay knew the two lights had to be on the same vessel. And now he knew something else, too. The red light he saw was the port bow light. The boat, whatever it was, was trying to enter the bay and find safety in the snug harbor.

But the boat was on the wrong side of the bay. Clay knew treacherous reefs lined the southern entrance to the bay. The lighthouse had been built to guide ships into the bay using the deep channel on the north side. But tonight there was no light. Clay realized he was going to witness a terrible boat wreck unless he fixed this lantern. Lives depended on him.

He turned away from the glass windows, switched the flashlight back on and reached for the tool carrier.

This wasn't a difficult job. He'd done it once before, but lives weren't on the line then. His hands were shaking more noticeably now as he reached for the ¼-inch socket wrench to unbolt the main electric panel.

Four bolts. That's all he had to unscrew to remove the plate. The harder he tried to control his hands, however, the more they shook. The wrench slipped off the bolt time after time.

Sweat poured down his brow and into his eyes, blurring his vision. Slowly and deliberately he used both hands to place the

wrench on the bolt and turn to loosen. One at a time. It seemed like it was taking forever. All he could think about was the white and red lights of that boat on a dead course for the reef.

Finally, all four bolts had been removed. He lifted the plate and shined the flashlight into the box. He was shocked. It didn't look at all like he remembered. *This is crazy*, he thought. *I'm the only one who comes up here, and I certainly didn't change this control panel.*

He stood up and looked out the window. The white and red lights were still all he could see in the distance, that and the fact they were closer in the bay now and even closer to the reefs.

Back to the panel. He had to think and act fast. No time to figure out why the panel was different. He had to fix it. He studied each wire and connection. It reminded him of the plate of spaghetti he had for dinner tonight.

He traced one wire at a time with his fingers, searching for a loose connection. Why were there so many wires? He only remembered there being five. Now there must be dozens crammed into this tiny panel box.

He'd trace one wire, find it secure. Move to the next and so on only to lose track and have to start over. He remembered the wires had been different colors. These were all the same. All black.

He was beginning to panic now. Dark thoughts raced through his mind. He wasn't going to be able to fix this light, after all, was he? He wasn't smart enough to make it work, was he? Because of his incompetence, people were going to drown on that reef tonight.

The shrieking noise of the wind and rain never let up. Clay choked back a scream. He thought he was going to lose his mind.

Fingers traced one wire after the other. Time passed. Then he felt a loose wire. Finally! He pushed the other wires to the side the best he could. Yep, there was a loose wire all right. And deep into the control panel, he could see the screw connector from where the wire had come loose.

Who designed this piece of crap? he thought. All these wires, the connectors hidden behind the wires deep inside the panel. Made no sense. *I would have designed it better*, he thought. *Stop it, stupid! Fix the light. People are about to die.* With his left hand, he held the wires to the side. With his right hand he reached down to the tool

carrier for the long screwdriver he needed to reach the connector deep inside the panel box.

No screwdriver. Then he remembered. The tool he desperately needed right now is at the bottom of the lighthouse. He frantically searched the carrier for another Phillips screwdriver. He found one and reached for the connector.

He couldn't reach it. This was insane. He had the full length of his arm plus the screwdriver inside the darn control box, and he was still several inches short of the connector. The connector was just out of reach. He screamed and slammed his body into the panel, thinking the extra effort would somehow close the gap. It didn't.

He shoveled through the tool carrier like a madman. He only had two screwdrivers. Neither long enough to reach the connector.

Vise Grips! *Ah, when in trouble reach for vise grips, that's what I say. And if vice grips don't work, use duct tape.* Clay laughed a tired, sick laugh. He had the solution. He'd clamp the short screwdriver into the vise grips. The extra length would be perfect.

He put the handle of the screwdriver into the jaws of the Vise Grip. It wasn't very secure. So he kept tightening the grips. Carefully he led the tool combination into the maze of wires toward the connector.

Wait, how was he going to get the darn wire onto the connector? He couldn't reach it with his hands.

Withdrawing the combination tool, he reached for the pliers in the tool carrier. With those he thought he could position the loose wire on the connector, but would it stay long enough to be secured?

His heart was beating fast, and his back ached from stooping over, but what really unnerved him was the slight sway of the lighthouse. He knew it had been built to withstand hurricane-strength winds and a little sway was to be expected. But that was of little comfort to him. The thought of the boat fighting the waves near the reef brought Clay back to his senses.

With pliers in his right hand, he held the loose wire and stretched it toward the connector. Slowly, he moved ever closer to the connector. When he was about an inch away, the wire wouldn't stretch any further. *What?* Clay yelled at the wire. *"You were on there*

once, you can be again.” But nothing Clay could do would move the wire close enough to the connector.

He withdrew from the panel. *Be cool, Clay. Think this through. You can do it.* He took another sip of water and dared to look out through the storm at the boat.

At first, he didn't see any lights, but that was because he had been looking in the wrong place. The vessel had advanced a lot farther into the bay during the time Clay had been working inside the wire panel. It was too late. Clay knew the bay like the back of his own hand. He knew there was no saving the boat now, even if the lighthouse should miraculously fire its beam across the darkness. The boat was doomed.

Clay watched the movement of the white and red lights as they were rocked in unison by the waves off in the distance. Clay screamed, *turn hard to port, turn hard to port!* The forward progress of the lights suddenly stopped. Clay wiped sweat from his eyes and peered intensely through the thick glass. No movement. The red and white lights were in the same position. In a few minutes, Clay could no longer see the red bow light. Only the white mast light remained. A few minutes later the light flickered and vanished into the darkness. The boat had sunk.

You stupid piece of crap! Clay screamed. *Because you couldn't fix the light, people are crab food now. You can't do anything right!* He picked up the tool carrier and threw it across the lantern room, scattering tools everywhere. He collapsed to his knees, totally defeated. Tears flowed like rivers down his face.

CHAPTER 2

"KIRO Radio Weather for Seattle today is rain showers this morning; partly cloudy in the afternoon. High of 52 and low of 39 tonight."

The annoyingly cheery weather girl was speaking to Clay from far off in the distance. For a few seconds, he was totally confused. Seattle weather? He wasn't in Seattle, he was . . . the lighthouse . . . where was he?

"And now the KIRO Copter Traffic Report, what's it like out there, Scott?" the over-caffeinated morning radio host asked.

"Not good. There's an injury wreck mid-span in the West-bound lanes of the Evergreen Point bridge. Traffic is backing up fast. If you can take an alternate route into town, take it now."

Clay opened his eyes. He scanned the room. He recognized the abstract paintings on the wall, saw the Bose clock radio. Six-fifteen a.m. It was his bedroom all right. No lighthouse. No cold metal floor. No lantern room. And more importantly, no shipwreck.

"Crap, another lighthouse dream!" Clay said out loud as he swung his legs out of bed and tried to stand.

He was exhausted as if he had never slept. He looked down at the bed, seriously considering returning to it. The bed was a total disaster. It looked like he had been wrestling alligators all night. Two pillows were on the floor, the comforter was nowhere to be seen, and the sheets were twisted into knots.

Well, no alligators, he corrected himself, but I'm sick and tired of having this same frustrating nightmare—fighting the same bolts, hearing the evil wind, and seeing the boat's lights sink from sight beneath the wind-whipped surf.

He'd had the same dream once a week for the past two months. It was getting to him. He was afraid to go to sleep some nights. He'd get into bed and just stare at the ceiling; afraid to close his eyes. So afraid that he started drinking a strong nightcap just before bed to help him sleep.

Maybe I need to talk to a shrink, he thought, as he walked toward the shower.

CHAPTER 3

Clay swung his BMW M5 into the private stall of the parking garage and killed the engine. His ego loved this part of the day. The private parking space, the sign on the wall that said, “Reserved for Mr. Austin” next to the spiffy ADB logo for Austin Davis Behr. But the good feelings never lasted for more than a few seconds before the other voice inside Clay took over. That private parking space was costing his company \$750 a month on top of the \$21,000 a month lease payment for the offices exactly five floors up from here. He calculated how many hours the firm had to bill every month just to cover the rent *and* this parking space. *My parking space in my building. Why am I worrying?*

Walking to the parking garage elevator he had to remind himself that he *was* worth it. He had earned it. But, when he stepped inside the elevator, he wasn't so sure. That lighthouse nightmare flashed through his mind again. A shot of panic made his heart jump. Why couldn't he ever get the darn lantern to work? Why did the boat always have to sink?

Clay pushed the last button on the elevator's control panel inside the door. There wasn't a number on this button. Just a green ADB on a yellow background, the same colors as his alma mater, the University of Oregon. The button visually jumped off the elevator control panel. It was bright and vibrant compared to the gray and black of the other six buttons. He loved looking at the buttons every day. P1, P2, 1, 2, 3, 4, ADB.

The polished metal doors slid closed, and the elevator carried its only passenger, now lost in thought, to the top floor.

The ADB building, as it was known to the locals, was located in the super-chic, super-trendy part of Seattle known to some as North

Lake Union, or Fremont to others. The area had been redeveloped about ten years earlier and was now home to technology companies, high-priced condos, coffee shops, bicyclers, electric cars, and microbreweries.

The offices of ADB occupied the top floor of the building. The southern side of the office faced the tree-lined ship canal that connected Lake Union to Puget Sound via a series of locks, called the Ballard Locks. Yachts and tugboats pulling barges traveled up and down these waters around the clock.

The canal in this area was lined with parks, trees, and a jogging path called the Burke-Gilman Trail. It was all very nice, especially on the rare nice day when the sun decided to make an appearance.

Clay, with his business partner, George Davis and another investor, formed an LLC to buy the building in 2015. ADP was then and now the largest tenant in the building. The value of the building had skyrocketed since the purchase, but Clay felt little comfort in his paper wealth.

The economics had him worried: Eighty percent of Clay's net worth was tied up in this building; fifty percent of the lease income for the property was paid for by ADB, and ADB was bleeding money like a stuck pig.

The bleeding had to stop.

The elevator door opened, and Clay stepped into the main office lobby of ADB to start another work week.

"Good morning, Clay," the energetic and friendly voice of the receptionist immediately greeted him before he could take a second step out of the elevator.

"Good morning, Betsy. Go Ducks!"

"Go Ducks!" She responded enthusiastically. March Madness, the annual college basketball tournament, started this week and the Oregon Ducks were playing that night. Betsy was one of many employees who were graduates of the University of Oregon, but she was the most fanatical when it came to supporting Oregon sports.

Three steps past the reception counter and Clay's mind was racing through what he had to accomplish this week if ADB (along with his financial security) could be salvaged.

He looked down the corridor and directly into the glass-walled conference room at the far end. It was just 8:30 on a Monday morning, but the conference room was bustling. He knew the account team for Lazzr.com had an important presentation later this morning. They were getting prepared.

Closer now, Clay could see all the team members. He checked to make sure everyone was there. They had struggled lately to work as a team. The group consisted of strong personalities, but some hadn't been pulling their own weight, which surprised Clay. There was Ali, the SEO specialist. Jordan, the social media researcher. Larry, the WordPress expert. Donna, content manager extraordinaire. Suzette, account manager. Clay studied Suzette, his partner, and slowed his pace to give him more time to observe before he reached the room's door.

Suzette Behr was the only one standing. Everyone else was seated, heads buried in their notebook PCs. Even from here Clay could sense the tension in the room. Some pre-presentation tension was to be expected. Too much was not good. It meant something was bothering the team.

Clay studied Suzette's face. She looked tired, haggard. Geez, her hair even looked like it hadn't been washed in two days. He hoped she planned to jump into the office's showers down in the gym before the client arrived.

He reached for the door handle, opened it just enough to stick his head in. "Are we ready, guys?" Clay asked with an encouraging smile. Everyone but Suzette jumped. They hadn't seen him approach the room through the glass, so focused were they on their computers. All eyes glanced quickly to Suzette to Clay, and then back to their PCs.

Suzette spoke up, "We'll be ready. Got a curve ball thrown at us, though. Last night Jordan saw a press release that had just been distributed. Google has agreed to purchase one of Lazzr's competitors for \$45 million. I called Loretta at home last night. She freaked. This changes everything. Now we're scrambling to adjust the plan before 11:30 when Loretta and her team arrive."

Clay was now standing in the room. He remained calm. Smiling. He scanned the room again.

“People, listen to me for a minute,” urged Clay. All heads looked up. They were panicked and tired. Suzette looked irritated that Clay was going to say something to *her* team. “We knew that Lazzr was vulnerable to a stronger competitor. It just happened a little sooner than we thought.” Clay was locking eyes with each person around the table now as he spoke. “But, let me tell you this. Lazzr is very, very fortunate to have the people in this room on their side because there isn’t a better marketing team anywhere, and ADB is known for helping smaller companies beat the Goliaths of the world.” He paused and started to leave, but turned to say, “Get your slingshots ready, people. You’re going to have some fun!” The tension in the room subsided but could still be felt.

He nodded to Suzette, “Let me know if I can help, Suzette.” She glared at him. That’s the moment Clay knew they were in trouble. The look in her eyes was not fearful, or panicked like the others had been before his pep talk. Her eyes were filled with hatred.

CHAPTER 4

In his office, Clay removed the sleek notebook computer from its carrying case, set it on the desk, and plugged it into the docking station. He pressed on the button. Soon the computer's display filled the three 27-inch monitors on his desk. *Showtime.*

Tap, tap. Clay looked up. His assistant, Sheryl Landing, stood in the doorway. She had his coffee cup in her right hand, steam rising from the rim. Her cup was in the left hand. He knew it didn't contain coffee. Sheryl never touched the stuff. She was a tea girl; the more exotic the tea, the better.

"Good morning. I saw you in the conference room on the way to the kitchen and took the liberty of bringing you coffee." She handed him his cup.

"Thanks," Clay said, a little surprised by her kindness, and not sure what else to say.

"No problem. Just don't expect it . . ."

"I know. I know," Clay stopped her. "You don't pick up my laundry, and you don't do coffee."

They grinned at each other. What Clay said was not only a long-standing joke between them, it was symbolic of the close, respectful relationship they had.

Clay glanced at his open door and lowered his voice. "What are your tea leaves telling you about the presentation today?" He fully expected her to playfully look into her cup before replying. Instead, she looked right into his eyes.

"Something's wrong. The energy in the team is really negative," she observed.

"Well, they got hit with a big surprise at the last minute," Clay explained.

“I heard, but listen, that’s not it.” She quickly glanced at the door to make sure no one could overhear the conversation. “There have been rumblings for several days. You weren’t here Friday to hear it.”

Clay motioned for her to have a seat in one of the four ridiculously expensive contoured chairs that surrounded the equally expensive and stylish coffee table. He sat down in the chair next to her, facing the door so he could see if anyone walked in while they spoke. “Go on,” he said.

“I work out with Jordan and believe me she’s not a happy camper. She said that Suzette has been on the war path, been a real bitch.”

“When did it start?”

“Jordan first started complaining to me after work last Monday,” she answered.

Clay thought back to last Monday. The partner meeting. That explained everything.

“George, Suzette and I are under a lot of pressure right now. You saw my PowerPoint deck before the partner meeting, so you know what I’m talking about.”

Yes, the three owners of ADB were feeling the heat right now, but Clay sensed there was more to Suzette’s attitude than financial worries. He decided to keep the thought to himself until it became more fully baked. He didn’t think Sheryl was completely convinced either, but there was a limit to what he should confide to his loyal assistant. It was times like this that he really missed having a wife with whom he could share this type of stuff.

“I know. George has been acting strange, too,” she declared.

That news took Clay by surprise. He had had several meetings with George since the partner meeting—even one with a client. George had been George.

“How so?” Clay asked, trying not to appear as surprised as he really was.

“He has been tense. Not as friendly to everyone as usual. I think he started smoking again, too,” she whispered the final words like she was revealing a secret code.

Clay was shaken. Not because George was rumored to have started smoking again, but because Clay had misread both of his

partners during the past week. Both of them were acting strangely. Well, George was acting strangely. Suzette had always been a bit of a snake in the grass, but a snake that always came around to doing what was best for the firm. The look of hatred in her eyes earlier this morning told him a different story.

“Hey, it’s nine o’clock. We’re burning daylight, and I’m not paying you to sit here and gossip,” Clay winked and stood up.

“Hey, look who’s talking. You need to get off your butt and generate some billable hours,” she winked back, stood and walked out of the office. She hadn’t touched her tea.

CHAPTER 5

With all he had to do today, with all the crap hanging over his head, what was he doing this very minute? Staring out the window. Who could blame him, because a few hundred yards from where Clay stood, coffee in hand, an enormous yacht was passing from right to left, heading through the ship canal into Lake Union. *Yeah, and to a boatyard eager to sell several thousand gallons of diesel fuel.*

Yachts and boats of all shapes and sizes navigated these waters. Most of the time Clay didn't even notice, so calloused he was to the sight of a million dollars of fiberglass and teak gliding past his window at a snail's pace.

But this was no ordinary yacht. This was in the super-yacht category. Clay guessed it was about the length of a football field, stem to stern. Fenders the size of NFL linebackers hung along the yacht's side every twenty feet or so to protect the ship from scratches when it tied up.

A few of the crew with matching sweaters could be seen scurrying around the deck. Checking this, coiling that, talking into walkie-talkies. Clay wondered if the owner was aboard. Probably not. Why would an owner be on board when the vessel is heading in for fuel, provisions, and possible repairs? Heck, later in the week the owner and wife (or mistress) would probably fly into Seattle's Boeing Field on their private jet, where the yacht's helicopter will pick them up and bring them to the boat while the vessel is heading into the emerald green solitude of the San Juan Islands north of Seattle. *Wonder who the owner is?*

For the first time, it struck Clay as highly unusual that he never envied the owners of super yachts. He liked knowing who they were

and how they made their millions (or billions), but he had never dreamed of standing on the deck thinking *this is mine; all mine!*

Why didn't he dream about owning a super-yacht? He loved boats. He had even owned a few sailboats in the years before ADB—before the demands of his firm stole away his spare time. Clay's sudden introspection surprised him. He had never asked himself that question before. He rationalized that he never dreamed about owning a super-yacht because he was too aware of how much it cost to buy and operate a vessel of that size. *I'll never make that kind of money.*

The sound of the yacht's horn brought him back from his deep thoughts. A group of kayakers was not moving out of the yacht's way fast enough for the ship's captain. A quick blast of the horn seemed to do the trick as the kayakers started paddling faster to one side of the canal.

This boat wasn't in his album.

Clay was getting pretty good at identifying who some of the super yachts belonged to. Just for kicks, he kept a photo album on his iPad to record the passage of impressive yachts. He researched the owners and tapped notes into his computer.

It was a fun hobby. Something to momentarily relieve the stress of running the leading marketing agency in the Pacific Northwest. He admired the beauty and power of the yachts at the same time.

He remembered a few years ago, when the 314-foot *Vava II* moved slowly past his office window. It was owned by Ernesto Bertarelli, the newspaper said the night it arrived. The *Serene*, owned by Yri Scheffler, a Russian vodka distributor, was over 500 feet long. It too plied the narrow waters of the canal past his office. Steve Balmer's Octopus, all 414 feet of it, had made the passage a few times. Its towering superstructure threw a shadow across Clay's office building that day as it inched past.

Clay picked up his iPad and snapped a few pictures of the gleaming blue hull as it slid by. He waited a bit longer until the stern was visible to take a picture of the vessel's name and home port.

El Faro, Cabo San Lucas, was written on the stern. *The Beacon*. Clay shuddered. The lighthouse nightmare roared through his brain like a wildfire destroying everything in its path.

He dropped the iPad on the credenza, then looked around to make certain no one noticed that he was shaking.

Pull yourself together, man!

A few deep breaths and a sip of lukewarm coffee did the trick. His shaking subsided, and heart rate fell back to normal.

In control now, he reached for his wireless mouse and clicked to enter the Contacts folder. He searched for Dr. Laura Shildstein, MD. Instantly the contact information for the doctor appeared on the screen. Clay glanced up at the open office door. He reached into his pocket, removed the cell phone and tapped the number. He didn't want this call to go through the office phone system.

CHAPTER 6

Clay returned from lunch with his CPA, Brett Martin. They had lunch together every three months at one of the hip seafood restaurants overlooking Shilshole Marina. Sometimes they even talked about Clay's finances. Most of the time their conversation covered the usual stuff guys talk about. Oregon sports, the lousy weather, local politics, and could that waitress' skirt be any shorter?

Brett wasn't your stereotypical CPA. He was fun and had a wild streak—loved 25-year-old Scotch, scuba diving, and sky diving. But when it came to money and finance, he was rock solid. Brett's advice had saved Clay a lot of money over the years and made him even more. It was Brett that showed Clay how he could swing the purchase of the ADB building years earlier.

Brett honked as he roared off in the brilliant blue Audi R8 Spyder. Not boring at all.

As he opened the double door into the building's ground floor entry, the relaxation of the past ninety minutes evaporated. Clay remembered that upstairs, the Lazzr meeting would be over. Would they still have the account?

Part of Clay desperately wanted them to hold onto the account. The firm needed the revenue right now. But the other part of Clay wanted Lazzr to fire them. Well, not *them*. To Fire *Suzette*.

Forgoing the elevator, he walked up the stairs to the top floor. He paused to catch his breath after the climb and then reached for the polished door handle leading into Austin-Davis-Behr.

Walking toward his office, he scanned the private offices and open work areas looking for the telltale signs on faces indicating victory or defeat. Suzette's office was empty. George's office was

empty. The energy level everywhere was low, too low, he thought for what was usually a rocking environment.

Sheryl looked up as he neared his office. One look and he knew. The Lazzr meeting hadn't gone well.

"Talk to me," he said, walking briskly past her desk and into his office.

She followed him in as he went to his desk and turned to face her. He wanted the information fast and short, so he kept standing. "Well ..."

Sheryl closed the office door before speaking. "Jordan confided to me that the meeting started great and ended terribly," her voice trembled a little. She knew what was at stake.

"And ..." Clay motioned with his hands for her to get on with the story.

"They presented the plan, which included a revised competitive strategy, of course."

"And ..." Clay was becoming annoyed at the preamble.

"Jordan said Lazzr was psyched about the plan, really liked it right up to the point when Suzette presented the campaign schedule," Sheryl explained.

"Huh?" Clay was taken aback by the answer. If client meetings go bad, it's because of disagreements with strategy, creative, or budget. Never schedule.

"Listen, Clay, Jordan said that Suzette presented a schedule *none* of them had seen before!"

"Okay, that doesn't sound right. Are you saying Suzette presented a schedule different from what they had worked on together?" Clay asked.

"Yep," Sheryl said with the same *I don't believe this really happened* look on her face that Clay was showing.

"What the heck was so weird about the stupid schedule?" Clay demanded.

"Suzette told them that work on the campaign should start in about two months," Sheryl knew what was coming next.

"Whiskey Tango Foxtrot! Lazzr needs action now, and we need the money now. Two months? B.S. Two weeks is the right schedule,

not two months,” he said. “Did Jordan say what Suzette’s rationale was?”

“Something about now not being the ideal time and the big industry trade show coming up,” Sheryl said.

She could see that Clay was seething. She didn’t like seeing her boss upset. He was usually steady as a rock, with a quiet intensity that people admired. But, on the rare occasions when he got angry . . . well, objects can get broken, and holes can be punched in walls.

“Where the heck is Suzette now?” Clay asked, sounding a little too hostile.

“I saw her and George going out for lunch after Lazzr left about 12:45.”

Clay glanced at the black iWatch on his wrist. The digital display read 1:52.

“Sheryl, please schedule a partner meeting for today. Topic: Lazzr Presentation.” His assistant looked at him as if to say, *bad idea, amigo*. “Cancel that. Schedule a meeting just with Suzette for today. Not too late, I have a meeting out of the office at 4:30.”

She nodded her approval and left Clay standing by the modern executive desk alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER 7

Day-to-day meetings between partners followed a certain unwritten code or etiquette. Whereas formal partner meetings always occurred on neutral ground—one of the conference rooms, or even at an offsite location—less official meetings to discuss clients and staff occurred in a partner’s office. Whose office the meeting occurred in could say a lot about the seriousness of the meeting and who was trying to impose their stature on the other. The dynamics of it all bored Clay, but he knew better than to ignore it. Sheryl was great at booking the “perfect room” for the occasion.

So, when Clay saw the accepted meeting show up on his computer calendar fifteen minutes later, it told him two things. Suzette had returned from lunch, and the meeting was going to be in her office.

Clay had to smile at Sheryl’s brilliance. Having the meeting in Suzette’s office, on her turf, wouldn’t put Suzette on the defensive. Plus, it wouldn’t reveal that Clay already knew a lot about what happened in the meeting. It was positioned as an informal, “hey, tell me how the Lazzr pitch went.” A meeting in his office was more akin to calling someone on the carpet after a mistake. And while Clay was the managing partner with 50 percent ownership and Suzette a minor partner at just 17 percent ownership, it worked best for the partners to consider themselves as equals. This level of mutual respect had worked well at ADB. The idea of “unequal equality” carried the day, but had to end when business decisions were to be made. Then, the decisions and voting had to follow ownership percentages: Clay 50 percent, George 33 percent, and Suzette, 17 percent.

Clay didn't want to pretend with Suzette that he was completely ignorant of the Lazzr outcome. Suzette was very sharp. She would expect Clay to ask around and find out whether it went well or not. She also knew just how plugged in Sheryl was to everything at ADB. It was no secret that Suzette despised Sheryl for what she knew and who she knew. It didn't help that Sheryl was smart and one of the most attractive women in the building. Suzette was super-smart, too, but always looked unkempt and frumpy. It bothered Clay that her hair was seldom clean. It hung down from her head straight, stringy and greasy. He couldn't remember the last time her face was totally clear of a reddened pimple, or a cold sore. She was an awesome strategic marketer, however, and a tremendous asset to ADB—at least up until now.

Right on time at 3:15, Clay walked into his junior partner's office. It was one-third the size of Clay's office and didn't overlook the Ship Canal, but it was large enough for a desk, couch, coffee table, and a few large silk plants.

"So, is it true that the Lazzr folks aren't happy with your plan?" Clay decided to get right to the point and make it clear it was *her* plan, *her* team that evidently came up short. Clay sat down on the couch, crossed his legs, and sipped at a Coke while watching Suzette's every move.

The hatred in Suzette's eyes was gone. In its place was nothing. No, that wasn't quite right. He could read something in her eyes. It was a falsified look of *everything's under control*. But behind that, Clay thought he saw something else—a flash of *I'm beating you, and you don't even know it*.

She spoke calmly, "Don't know where you heard that. They loved the strategy."

Clay was immediately saddened and alarmed. His junior partner was concealing information from him. Why?

"Glad to hear it. What I saw last week was really impressive, but I know you had to make some changes at the last minute." Clay stopped and waited for more information to be shared.

"No problem. I handled it," Suzette said. She was playing this close to the vest, Clay thought. He didn't like the egotistical nature of

I handled it. There was a team of four others who had busted their butts for two weeks on the plan.

“That’s awesome,” Clay tried to sound convinced while watching her very closely now. “When do we start?”

“The plan is anchored around eComm World, the big eCommerce trade show in May. Work will start in a month or so,” her tone was matter-of-fact as if this timing was obvious to those smart enough to get it.

“How did Loretta react to the schedule?” Clay asked. “She’s usually the most impatient one in the room,” Clay continued, not wanting this to sound like a cross-examination in a TV court drama.

“She was taken aback by the schedule at first, but eventually came around the more I explained the rationale of the strategy and the wisdom of keeping our powder dry for a few months,” Suzette explained.

“Cool. When do they sign the work order? You and I talked last Monday about Lazzr’s billings. They’ve been declining for six months. The new plan is a great opportunity to boost billings at a time when we really need the money,” Clay explained what should be obvious to his business partner.

The next question came at Clay like a sliced tennis serve with a lot of side spin on the ball. “Are you suggesting, Clay, that I put the interests of our firm ahead of the interests of Lazzr?”

Clay wasn’t totally surprised by the sharp reply. What made him leery was the careful wording and pronunciation of her question. It sounded rehearsed, as if she had been setting up the conversation for this moment, and that question. *Is Suzette recording this conversation?*

Clay returned serve. “Not at all. You of all people know how I stand on that philosophy. Putting clients first is part of our mission statement. You know, the one we read to each other before every partner meeting.” Clay loved that answer and hoped the conversation was being recorded just so it was on the record.

He continued, “I’m not being a Monday morning quarterback here, believe me. I do see three points. First, Lazzr is a company of action. It’s in their DNA to act quickly. Second, being proactive when there’s a shift in the competitive landscape is often the best course.

Third, the earlier we start, the stronger Lazzr will be going into eComm World, *and* we'll be able to start billing them again, this month even."

Suzette snapped a backhand sharply across the net. "Let me remind you that I'm a partner here because of my strategic planning prowess." The word prowess sounded strange coming from her mouth. It was dripping with pride. "I'm a great marketer because I don't do the expected. I do what will shake up the market and move the needle. This is what Loretta understands now. She's on board."

Clay smiled. He liked her spunk. Really did. It was one of the reasons he and George invited her to buy into the firm five years ago. She had been Chief Marketing Officer at Zilbean. Took it public. Waited one year after the IPO to sell her stock and walked away with \$5.8M. Not bad for three year's work. She immediately bought a larger house on Lake Washington and agreed to buy a 17 percent stake in Clay and George's firm, then Austin-Davis.

Clay's phone was vibrating in his pocket. It was time to end this. His forehand volley shot past her like a rocket and skipped inside the white lines in the back corner out of reach. "Okay, your call. Lazzr is your account. Just know, partner, that your projected billings are down this year by \$800,000. Delaying the Lazzr campaign is only going to exacerbate the revenue shortfall." Suzette started to say something, but Clay cut her off and stood to leave. "By Friday, please let George and I know how you plan to make up the \$800,000 this year. I'll have Sheryl set up a partner meeting."

Game. Set. Match.

The darn phone was still vibrating as he walked from Suzette's office to his own. He jerked it out of his pocket and stared at the display. The alarm for his 4:30 with Dr. Shildstein reminded him it was time to leave. He also had a phone message. Loretta from Lazzr had called.

CHAPTER 8

The meeting with Suzette was unsettling. Clay sensed something wasn't right, but couldn't put his finger on it. He acknowledged himself for how he handled the meeting, but his situation and the firm's wasn't any better off for his performance today.

Clay drove the silver M5 out of the parking garage and into a drizzling rain as winter darkness covered the city like an unwelcome blanket. He headed east toward the doctor's office, a smart little bungalow on the other side of the Ship Canal from the University of Washington campus.

Through voice commands, he instructed his phone to call Loretta at Lazzr. *This is going to be an interesting call.*

"Hello, this is Loretta," Clay's client answered her cell in her usual friendly, professional tone.

"Loretta, this is Clay Austin returning your call."

"Oh hi, Clay. Thanks for returning my call." Clay strained to hear through the car's speakers anything in her voice that could tip him off to what was coming next. It was useless. Too much noise. Rain was falling harder on the roof and window; the windshield wipers, sensing the rain, automatically started sweeping slowly back and forth.

"Clay, have you spoken with Suzette about the presentation today?" Loretta asked. *A perfectly normal question*, Clay thought to himself.

"Yes, she briefed me late this afternoon. She said there was a lot of debate about the schedule," Clay said, preferring not to reveal too much too early.

"I was very surprised, no, I was shocked actually that I'd ever hear from ADB a recommendation to do nothing in response to competition," there was irritation and stress in her voice now.

There it was. Clay had to decide to support his partner or his client. Usually, situations like this were easy. He always backed the firm except in cases of obvious error or misjudgment. But, in this case, he didn't agree with Suzette's timing.

He responded, "I admit the timing is a bit uncharacteristic, but I have confidence in Suzette's sense of strategy and market impact. We certainly aren't recommending 'doing nothing,' Loretta." Clay decided that sounded a little defensive and sharp. He wanted to soften it. He and Loretta were old friends after all. "Suzette has shown time and time again the wisdom of her plans," Clay stated, not wanting to believe it fully himself.

"I want to trust Suzette. I want to trust you and ADB, but delaying our campaign is so contrary to who we are as a company. We think fast and move fast. That characteristic plus our innovation has put us on the map" she said.

"That's correct. Responsiveness is in your DNA," he said while parking his car at the curb outside the doctor's office.

"It used to be in ADB's DNA, too," Loretta said with a lot of emphasis on the *used to be*.

Clay thought back to the original pitch that won the Lazzr account for ADB. They went out of their way to prove to Lazzr how fast and flexible they were. In the end, it was the agency's ability to think fast and work fast that swayed Lazzr's executives to go with ADB. The cultures were aligned.

"We still are, Loretta, but moving fast just for the sake of moving fast isn't a sound strategy. Suzette believes that the most impact and market disruption can be obtained by waiting a few weeks," Clay said, not liking that it sounded too much like a lecture.

"It's not a few week's delay, Clay. It's two months." Loretta was sounding exasperated and uncomfortable. "Look, I have dinner with Reggie and Charlotte tonight to review the recommendation with them. They will ask me if I support ADB's recommendation. I can't say that I do," she said.

Reggie and Charlotte were the co-founders of Lazzr. They had never been 100 percent in favor of ADB. Both had close relationships with other agencies, but they had wisely let Loretta make the marketing decisions.

Clay took a deep breath and slowly exhaled to calm himself before speaking, "Loretta, I know this is a tough situation, but please remember one thing. We are a team. Lazzr and ADB. Like a good marriage, we're going to have disagreements, but we work it out together. This isn't a client versus agency battle. It is two partners working together to find the right path to success." For the second time today, Clay was amazed at the wisdom of his words. *That was great stuff. Where did those words come from?*

"I hear you, Clay, and I want to believe it, too," she responded. "I'll call you Tuesday."

"Great. And don't forget who always invites you to the Oregon-Oregon State game every year," Clay said thinking some humor with his old friend would go over well right now.

Loretta chuckled, "Yes, and I've almost forgiven you for 2016. Such a terrible game and in the pouring rain, too."

"I promise to do better this year. Talk tomorrow," Clay said and touched the disconnect button on the steering wheel to end his call.

Opening the car door, he immediately felt the cold rain on his head. Scrambling up the walk to the door of the doctor's office, Clay couldn't help but think about his day. What a Monday! Ducking boomerangs all day long. *And tomorrow they'll be circling back at me again.*

CHAPTER 9

Sitting inside Dr. Shildstein's office for the first time, he scanned the room and compared it to the shrinks' offices he had seen in the movies.

This office was very comforting. No doubt a lot of effort went into designing and furnishing the space just for that effect. It was homey but definitely not cheap. The light brown leather sofa that Clay sat on looked like the one his interior designer had tried to sell him last year for \$4,500. Clay opted for something almost as nice for \$2,500. In front of where Clay sat was a low coffee table—a blue ceramic and mahogany combination that appealed to Clay.

Across from the sofa was the ubiquitous psychiatrist's chair. It was high-backed, sleek but not sharp. Rounded corners, but not over-stuffed like some chairs can be. It was upholstered in rich burgundy-toned leather. It looked very comfortable. Clay was tempted to run across the room and sit in the chair to try it out before the doctor entered the room to start the session. He decided the risk of being caught in her chair was too high. *Don't act like a child, Clay.*

On the gray walls were many photos, watercolors, and acrylics of the most incredible hot air balloons he had ever seen. Brilliantly colored balloons soared above all types of amazing terrain. A red and yellow balloon flew above the rolling wheat fields of eastern Washington's Palouse country. Drifting down the Columbia River Gorge was a black, orange, and silver beauty. Floating high above the sea cliffs with the ocean surf and a ... no way! Clay's eyes locked onto the painting. It was larger than the others, measuring about 36 by 54 inches. It dominated one entire wall next to a small desk. The perspective of the painting was dizzying. The viewpoint was from high above the balloon and to its right side, so one saw the balloon

and everything far below it. There were the rugged tree-covered cliffs of the Washington coast. The crashing waves. But what caught Clay's attention and sent his heart racing was the other object in the painting below the balloon. A lighthouse.

Clay tried to brush it off as a coincidence. Here he was in a psychiatrist's office to talk about his recurring nightmare of a lighthouse, and what does the shrink have on the wall? A painting of a stupid lighthouse! *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot!*

He couldn't take his eyes off the painting, however. The balloon's design was simple—just brilliant white that made it stand out sharply from the background colors. There was an emblem of some type on the balloon. Only part of it was visible because of the angle. Clay squinted from his position on the sofa to make out what sort of logo was on the balloon. A sponsor of some sort, he figured. From what he could see, it looked like a simple stick figure. A vertical rectangle with a horizontal rectangle intersecting with it near the top. What was it? Clay's mind tried to match the partially exposed symbol to some logo pattern he could recognize. Just as he gave up, the answer came. It was a cross. A Christian cross.

Clay was so mesmerized by the painting he didn't hear Dr. Shildstein enter the room.

Dr. Shildstein stepped into the office and saw her new patient twisted on the sofa looking behind him at one of her paintings. She made a mental note of his interest.

"Mr. Austin, sorry to keep you waiting," she said calmly and quietly, not wanting to scare him.

Clay jumped anyway as his mind was torn loose from the painting. He swirled around as if he had been caught stealing cookies.

"Oh, uh, uh, hi, doctor," Clay stuttered, trying desperately to regain control and sound normal. "I was just admiring your art. Are you a hot air balloon pilot?"

Her eyes seemed to look right through him, but not in a hostile way. In an instant Clay felt that she had looked deep into him, like an MRI could, and saw everything. *She knew!* Her smile was warm and sincere.

Clay stood to shake hands. She was short, probably under five feet tall in heels, Clay estimated. She was slender and super-fit. Her handshake was strong. And while they shook hands, her eyes never left Clay's.

"No, I'm not a pilot, but I am a bit of an aficionado. Ever since my husband proposed to me on one twenty years ago, there has been a special place for them in my heart. We take a ride every chance we get. Plus the balloons are a great metaphor for how I help patients," she said, turning to sit in her chair and motioning for Clay to be re-seated on the couch.

Clay immediately thought of cracking a joke about hot air, but wisely thought against it. He sat down and poured a glass of water from the polished metal container on the coffee table.

"So, Mr. Austin, this is our first session together. I see that Brett Martin referred you," she stated after glancing to her notepad.

"That's correct. He spoke highly of you," Clay responded truthfully. According to Brett, Dr. Shildstein kept him from totally losing it after his messy divorce.

"Here's how this goes. First, we're on a first-name basis during our sessions. I'm Laura. You're Clay. If we happen to meet outside the office I am Dr. Shildstein; you are Mr. Austin. Understood?"

Clay nodded.

"Each session is fifty minutes. This being our first session it may run seventy-five minutes. Please be on time. If you miss a scheduled session, I'm still going to charge you anyway. As I said on the phone, each session is \$225." She paused. "With me so far?"

Clay nodded. He liked her style.

"Of course, everything you say to me is completely confidential. The non-disclosure statement I had you sign before this session makes that fact very clear. It also makes it clear that this confidentiality does not cover situations where you mention illegal activity considered a felony. I am bound by law to report you to the authorities in those cases. Understood?" she said, her words were crisp and direct.

"Roger that," Clay answered. "I'll keep all planned murders to myself." His grin faded when he noticed she wasn't smiling.

She opened her notebook, removed a pen from the inside of her well-tailored suit jacket, and said, "Why did you come to see me today, Clay?"

Great question, he thought. Just why the heck was he here? He should be at the office going over the books figuring out how to make ends meet.

"This is going to sound silly, but I keep having the same nightmare," Clay said and waited for the next question. It didn't come. Instead, she kept looking at him. "I have this crazy dream maybe twice a week. It started two months ago, I believe." *This is where she's going to ask me what the dream is about*, Clay thought. She didn't. Her head was nodding up and down ever so slightly and slowly.

"You called this dream a nightmare. What makes it a nightmare rather than just a dream?" she asked.

"It's really frustrating," Clay answered right away.

"You consider the dream a nightmare because there's something about the dream that is frustrating?"

"Yes," he said.

"Are you in the nightmare? Is something happening to you?" she said.

"I'm in it all right. I'm the star of the show or villain. Not sure what I am."

The doctor made a notation in the notebook. "You don't know if you're a hero or a villain in the dream?" she asked.

"I start out being the reluctant hero. At the end, I'm a worthless idiot. People die because of me," Clay said, and felt the emotion of the nightmare well up inside him again.

Her pen was working furiously now. She looked up and locked her gaze onto Clay. "People died in the dream because of you?"

"Yep, I couldn't fix the light in time, so the boat crashed on a reef during a storm." Clay took another swallow of water and realized he had already consumed three-quarters of the water in the glass.

"What light is it that you're seeing in the dream?"

"It's a lighthouse, Laura. An old broken lighthouse. I have to fix it during a storm. A ship crashes on a reef because I can't fix the light in time."

“Do you recognize the lighthouse? Is it the same one in every dream?” s

“Same lighthouse every time. No, I don’t recognize it,” he said.

“Anyone else in the dream?” she asked.

“Just the poor unlucky folks in the boat. Never saw them. I just know there were people on the boat and it sank at night after hitting the reef.”

“Just you, the lighthouse, the boat and the people on the boat. That’s it?” she tried to summarize the elements of the dream as if writing a playbill.

“Yep, a small cast,” Clay said trying to play along. But there was someone else, or *something* else, Clay remembered. He tried to think.

“What is it, Clay? You left me just now.”

“Oh, uh, sorry, doctor, I mean Laura. I was back in the nightmare,” Clay said taking another sip of water from the glass.

“And ...?” Laura asked with the ultimate open-ended question.

“I don’t know. There were times during the dream when I thought there was a monster or something outside the lighthouse,” Clay said, embarrassingly feeling like a little kid complaining about the monster under the bed.

“Did you see a monster?” she asked.

Grateful that the doctor wasn’t laughing at him, Clay replied, “No, I never saw it. I felt its presence though. And it made a terrible sound somewhere between a hiss and a roar. I didn’t know for sure if it was an evil presence or just the gale wind outside the walls,” Clay explained.

“An evil presence. That’s an interesting way to describe it,” she remarked.

“Interesting when I’m awake, yes. Terrifying when I’m in the dream,” Clay said.

“Indeed. Our dreams can be very terrifying and seem very real,” she said. “You said the dream made you feel frustrated. Explain that feeling to me.”

“Yeah, frustration, panic, hopelessness, fear. It was a real bummer.”

“Go on.”

“That’s it. Those were my feelings.”

“You had all those feelings because the boat was going to crash?”

“Yeah, the lighthouse lantern wasn’t shining so the boat couldn’t navigate the bay’s entrance properly. I wanted to save the people.”

“What stopped you from turning on the light?”

Clay felt as if an icy hand was squeezing his heart. He started breathing more quickly, fidgeting. Drinking water. *Get me out of here.*

The doctor noticed the change in Clay’s mannerisms. She wrote in the notebook.

“Clay, what stopped you from turning on the light?”

“The light was broke, I guess. I tried to fix it.”

“What happened when you tried to fix it?”

Clay exploded. He shot up from the sofa, spilling water from his glass on the table and floor.

“I couldn’t fix the stupid light, okay.” The words hurdled out of his mouth with a vengeance. “I couldn’t reach the problem inside the control panel. My tools weren’t the right length. I tried. I really tried!”

As if coming out of a trance, Clay suddenly realized he was standing, fists clenched, staring at the doctor still seated in her expensive leather chair with eyes locked on his. She wasn’t even blinking, so intense was her focus on Clay.

“You’re angry, Clay.”

“Damn right, I’m angry!” He started pacing back and forth between the sofa and coffee table. “I come here to talk about a stupid dream, and you start blaming me for not fixing the broken light. I don’t need this crap.”

“I’m sorry. Please have a seat.”

How could she stay so calm? Clay sat down, noticed the puddle of water on the table and floor. He pulled several tissues from the box on the table and soaked up the water.

“Sorry, doctor, er, Laura, I didn’t mean to spill the water.”

“That’s okay. Not the first time, believe me.” She paused, watching him, and Clay felt she was gauging his every movement. “Clay, it’s interesting that you thought I was blaming you for not fixing the light in your dream. Are you aware that I never said anything about it?”

He thought back on the conversation for a few seconds. "You asked me why I couldn't fix the light."

"Actually, Clay, what I asked was 'what happened when you tried to fix the light.'"

"I thought you said 'why couldn't I fix it, or something like that.'"

"That's what you heard me say, but believe me, that isn't what I said."

Clay sat back into the sofa. He crossed his arms and legs, and stared at the table in front of him.

"When you thought I was criticizing you, you became very upset. Don't you think it's interesting that you thought I was criticizing you for not fixing the light, rather than criticizing you for not preventing the boat from crashing?"

"I guess. What's the difference?"

"Well, there is a difference, but we don't have to look at it right now. We still have time remaining in our session. I'd like to put the dream aside for now. Is that okay?"

"I guess that means you can't fix me in one session."

A warm, controlled, laughter rolled out of Laura. "I don't view this work as 'fixing you,' Clay. And, yes I'm afraid our work together has just begun."

"Whatever it takes. I want those dreams gone."

"Great attitude. Now then, tell me about your childhood, Clay."

CHAPTER 10

It seemed Clay had just found his rhythm telling the doctor about his childhood when she held up her hand signaling the session was over.

They set another appointment for Wednesday at 4:30. Clay wrote the doctor a check for \$225 and slipped out the door. It was still raining as he dashed to his car.

Usually, when Clay pushed the Start button to bring his 560-horsepower coupe alive, it sent a pleasant rush of adrenalin through him. Not tonight. He was exhausted by the day's events. His hour with the psychiatrist didn't help any.

Deep in thought and drained of energy, he directed the sleek BMW south onto Montlake Boulevard toward its intersection with 520. Clay's two-story houseboat was not that far away, but getting there from this part of town wasn't simple. There wasn't a direct route. On any other night, he might take the more leisurely way, winding westward through neighborhoods until he reached Fairview Avenue that hugged the eastern shore of Lake Union. But tonight, he craved some energy. He had a need for speed.

Clay couldn't believe his luck when he realized that he was first in line at the intersection light waiting to enter the 520 freeway. The light turned green, and Clay's foot went down. The gleaming silver car fishtailed slightly on the wet pavement, straightened out and shot forward, pushing Clay's head back against the headrest. By the time he entered the freeway from the short ramp he was already doing 60 mph. There wasn't much traffic in this direction on the freeway, and he kept his foot on the accelerator.

He was doing 95 mph within a matter of seconds. This felt so good! He wanted to keep going, pushing faster, but his turnoff was

just ahead. Turn signal on, he slashed between two cars in the right lane just in time to make the exit. He kept to the right for the Roanoke Exit. Now he had precious little distance to reduce the car's speed before the light at the intersection. His left hand flicked the paddle shifter, working the car down through the gears, while he gently increased pressure on the brake pedal. He roared up behind an SUV at the light and stopped without even a skid. *German engineering! Gotta love it.*

Clay's heart was beating fast. The entire speed warp had only lasted two or three minutes, but in those minutes he totally forgot all about Suzette, Lazzr, and Dr. Shildstein. It was just him, the road, and his magnificent machine.

A few minutes later he was on the narrow Fairview Avenue. He drove up to an electronic gate, swiped his security card across the sensor, and entered the private parking area reserved for owners of six exclusive houseboats.

Clay's houseboat was not a boat at all. It was a 3,000 square foot, award-winning home built on floats and secured to a dock together with five other homes. His home was the furthest away on the dock, which meant he had an unobstructed view of Lake Union beginning at his doorstep, and the Seattle skyline about a mile to the south. It also meant he had the farthest to walk from the car.

This was the small penalty one paid for living in a houseboat. One had to walk a distance in the wind and rain between your car and home. Carrying groceries was a real drag. Yet, the minute Clay stepped inside his home the cold, wet walk was quickly forgotten.

His architect had struck the perfect balance between modern and maritime. Wood accents and curved walls danced with polished steel. Every piece of furniture was selected to not only look fabulous but to be extremely comfortable. Clay lit a fire, poured himself a glass of Oregon Pinot Noir and settled into his favorite reclining chair facing the two-story window. The lights of downtown Seattle sparkled to his left. The dark ridge of Queen Anne Hill was just visible across the lake. A small tugboat plowed slowly up the lake.

It was calm now, but still raining. The lake bravely tried to reflect the city lights in a show of blurred color, but the persistent raindrops broke the reflections.

His mind raced through the day while he twirled the red wine in its glass.

Why did Suzette put the agency in such a precarious position when it wasn't necessary to do so? Why did she look so hateful in the conference room, and so coy talking about the meeting later in her office?

What was Loretta at Lazzr going to do as a result of the meeting?

And on top of it all, how was ADB going to survive if Lazzr walked?

Clay sipped the wine and thought back to last Monday's partner meeting, searching for clues. The meeting was as contentious a meeting as the three partners had ever experienced together.

Billings for the year were down, in no small part because Lazzr had been in a hold-pattern. Other clients had cut back their marketing budgets some, but the real pinch was because late last year the partners forecasted a twenty percent growth in billing and hired additional talent in anticipation of what appeared a sure thing.

How were they to know that in early January Wall Street would get the jitters over an interest rate hike? That action sent the market south, and ADB's clients got spooked and held back on marketing spending until they could see the road ahead more clearly.

So, here they stood, staffed to handle twenty percent more billing than they currently had. They either needed to cut back or add more billing fast. While the financial situation added stress, the argument that nearly turned into a brawl was over the other topic on the agenda.

In January Clay had received an overture from a top-20 agency in Dallas. They were interested in acquiring ADB. Phil Manicotti, the CEO of Pitt-Needham Group, had dinner with Clay the weekend before the partner meeting. Over a roasted king salmon dinner, he made his pitch.

ADB would become a subsidiary of Pitt-Needham Group. Clay would continue to run the shop, reporting directly to Phil. They would have access to the worldwide resources of the larger company. Pitt-Needham Group would have a blue-ribbon agency on the ground in the booming Pacific Northwest region.

The purchase price looked good. Clay told Phil he and his partners hadn't talked about being acquired. On the contrary, they were always on the hunt for talented boutique firms they could buy. Over coffee and Cognac, Clay told Phil he would discuss the offer with his partners in their next meeting.

There was a lot to like about the offer, but something deep inside Clay was screaming "no!"

He didn't know if he could trust Phil. Did he really mean to keep Clay, or would Clay get the axe within a few months of the deal closing so Phil could put one of his people in the top spot? The more Clay thought about it, the less certain he was that being acquired was the right move right now.

Being part of a larger firm, a public one at that, meant a lot more scrutiny on budgets and billings. Pitt-Needham Group was the big league all right. Was ADB up to it? Was Clay up to it, that was the real question?

Clay was comfortable being the managing partner of a well-respected, mid-sized agency. He really didn't have ambitions to climb any higher. Sure, he'd sell, but not until he was ready to retire.

That's where the argument started between Clay, George, and Suzette. Both of his partners were ecstatic when they heard about the intent to purchase ADB. They saw the chance to make some serious money on their shares and be part of a larger agency with offices and clients in five countries.

When he voiced concerns, they couldn't understand his hesitation. He stood to make the most money. He'd be a rich man. And, he'd be on the executive team of a worldwide agency. What's there not to like?

Clay tried to express his reservations. He wasn't convincing. Tempers flared, and Suzette accused Clay of playing small. She was a very ambitious woman, and when she was being held back, by a man no less, she could become ferocious.

George was also irritated with Clay. He was older than Clay by nearly 15 years. Cashing out now wasn't such a bad idea for him.

In the end, after heated debate, Clay tabled the discussion until the next partner meeting. In the meantime, he'd ask Phil for some more information about the structure of the proposed deal just to buy some time.

Clay tried to envision his name on a Pitt-Needham Group business card. He couldn't do it.

Clay stopped thinking about the partner meeting and realized he was still a little chilled after the walk from the car. He poked the fire and reached for another piece of wood from the rack by the fireplace. His hand gripped a piece of oak and tossed it into the flames.

The round log hit the embers, sending sparks into the protective screen of the fireplace. The log rolled off the flames and threatened to roll out of the fireplace until Clay stopped it with his poker.

Shouting, Clay yelled, "Get back in there you piece of crap. You're not coming out here." With his poker, he violently hurled the log back into the fire. Something inside him snapped.

A string of expletives rolled from Clay's mouth. He was actually swearing out loud at a log, of all things.

What the heck is going on? Twice in one day he had lost his cool.

He sat back in his chair, and took a long drink of wine to calm his nerves. His eyes went from the fireplace to the rack of wood next to it.

Then he heard a voice from somewhere in the darkness of the house.

"Stack it over again," was all the male voice said.

CHAPTER 11

Fear shot through Clay like a flaming arrow. His heart raced as adrenaline pumped through his veins. It was all he could do to set the glass of wine down on the stand by his chair without spilling its contents all over his prized Persian rug.

Except for the glow from the fireplace the house was dark. Somebody was in the house. Somewhere. Or was it his imagination? His mind had certainly been working overtime lately. Anything was possible. But, he had heard the words clearly: “Stack it over again.”

He gathered the courage to turn on the reading light by his chair and stand up in a single fluid motion. He faced the darkness ready for a ... ready for what? Fight or flight?

Familiar shapes in the house were now visible in the light from the single lamp. There was the outline of the dining room table and chairs with the overhanging chandelier. Farther back he could see the kitchen counter and stools. Small night lights on the stairs revealed nothing on the wood-and-steel stairs leading up to the master suite. *Way too many hiding places.*

A weapon. He needed a weapon. Hands trembling, he reached for the fireplace poker. Feeling its weight, seeing the pointed end, he was comforted. *That should work.* How many murder-mystery movies had he seen in which the fireplace poker always contained the critical clues to the whodunit. Sure, but whose blood would be on this poker at the end of the night? His?

Clay advanced slowly, silently, through the house with the poker ready to strike. Keeping his back close to an outside wall, he advanced on a path that would take him exactly opposite to a panel

of light switches. His ears strained to hear any unusual noise in the house—any sound of footsteps. The winter rain had increased outside, its noise on the roof was all Clay could hear.

Clay was now standing, poker in hand, about twenty feet from the light switch panel. He would have to move across the open floor to reach the lights. He would be a sitting duck. *Heck, you're a sitting duck now! Just do it!*

Clay sprinted for the light switches, hitting them with his left hand repeatedly until every switch was in the on position. He whirled around so his back wouldn't be to the center of the room.

"*Who's there?*" Clay yelled, trying to sound tough and menacing. His eyes darted around the main room.

He raced into the dining room ready for battle. Nothing. He sprinted to the kitchen, certain someone was hiding behind the counter. Nothing there either. Striding down the short hall, he started throwing open doors and looking inside. First the pantry door, then the restroom, guest bedroom, and the wet room, the special teak-paneled room for changing out of wet clothes after coming in from the lake. He checked its door that led to the private outside deck. It was securely locked.

The stranger must be upstairs. Had to be. Clay started up the stairs. The upstairs suite was dark, so he flipped all the lights on from the panel at the bottom of the stairs. With the second story fully lit, he advanced slowly up the stairs. No sense being quiet. It knew he was coming.

Clay checked the entire master suite. He even looked under the bed, recalling briefly his early childhood when he was absolutely certain that little-boy-eating monsters lived under his bed.

He checked and rechecked every room, every nook upstairs. Wasn't he supposed to yell "clear" or something? That's what the cops always did when they broke into a house, service weapons in hand, looking for a perpetrator of some crime.

A metal spiral staircase led up to a door that opened to the roof-top sitting area. He tested the door. It was solidly locked. The sliding glass doors across from the king-sized bed were also secure.

For the first time since picking up the poker, he held it loose at his side rather than in a striking positioning.

Feeling spooked and very foolish Clay walked back down the steps into the main living area. After checking that all doors and windows on the first floor were securely locked, he replaced the poker in its stand and sat down in his chair.

"Whiskey Tango Foxtrot," he muttered to himself.

He treated himself to several long drinks of the Pinot. It tasted different than before. Clay had read somewhere that fear can change the chemistry in your mouth such that food doesn't taste right. Well this Pinot didn't taste right, and he had been scared. He drank it anyway and poured some more. Clay hadn't eaten dinner and soon the wine and warm fire worked together to soothe his raw nerves. He noticed he was hungry, so he shuffled into the kitchen and prepared a plate of fruit, cheese, and crackers.

Back in his chair, he began wolfing down the snack with more wine. His mind began to race again. What the heck had just happened anyway? He had heard the words clearly, "Stack the wood over again." Was he becoming schizophrenic, or another type of insanity? This morning he had been haunted by a lighthouse nightmare and now haunted by a hidden voice? What next? And why?

Staring now at the rack of neatly stacked wood next to the fireplace he thought back to that special relationship he had with wood and fireplaces. It was a minor miracle he had a fireplace at all, let alone a wood-burning one.

Any pile or stack of wood would call up memories of his childhood. And Vic.

CHAPTER 12

Gray, gray, gray. Everything was gray. The heavy gray clouds filled the sky and hung so low they seemed to be glued to the rooftops and pine trees of the Salem, Oregon, neighborhood. It wasn't raining exactly, but it was damp and numbingly cold for early October.

Clay could see his breath vapor while he worked. The cheap cloth work gloves he wore were already soaked, making his hands ache in the chill of the darkening afternoon. He had been out here since noon in the vacant lot next to his parent's modest ranch style home. To his right were two piles of wood, just delivered that morning by dump trucks. One pile consisted of oak and laurel logs. The other pile was a messy mix of fir—waste pieces from a local sawmill—different shapes and thicknesses, each coated with damp sawdust.

In front of Clay was the beginning of a wood stack he was building from the pile of fir. The stack was about eight feet long and now about two feet high. He hated to stack fir. It was slow and agonizing work because the pieces were all so irregular. It was like building a vertical picture puzzle without a picture to follow. Just his luck he had no choice but to stack the fir first. It was the first to be delivered. The fir pile blocked his direct access to the oak pile.

And there he stood. He glanced over to the driveway and the basketball hoop above the garage door. That's what he wanted to do this afternoon. Shoot some hoops while imagining he was a star basketball player for his school. Imagining the girls who'd compete for his affections because he was such a basketball stud at fourteen.

He glanced at the neglected basketball on the lawn where it had been dropped when Clay heard the first of the dump trucks stop

at the house, back up slowly into the vacant lot, tilt the dump body, and spill the messy fir pieces onto the ground. That meant Clay's plan to spend Saturday afternoon playing basketball and skateboarding had just gone up in smoke. Clay knew the rules. Wood piles were to be converted into wood stacks the same day. No, *and, if, or buts.*

The first truck roared off to ruin someone else's day. Unbelievably, a few moments later a second truck pulled up and repeated the same depressing show. When it, too, had left in a cloud of diesel, two loads of wood needed to be stacked. The weekend he had planned was not to be, it was officially going to be a forced labor camp for one.

Somehow, all the work associated with enjoying a wood-burning fireplace was Clay's responsibility and had been since he was ten years old. He was expected to: stack the wood neatly outside the house; bring a supply of wood into the house every day; chop kindling for starting the fire, and build a fire every evening before his mother and step-father came home from their respective jobs. It was even his job to remove the ashes from the fireplace every other week.

Every night sitting in the living room with Vic and his mom, watching TV, Clay could only fume in silence as Vic seemed to delight in setting new records for nightly wood consumption. The more he added to the fire, the more Clay had to carry into the house. The more Vic burnt up, the more wood they had to order, and of course, the more Clay had to stack.

With each log tossed into the flame, Vic seemed to be taunting Clay. *I dare you to say something, kid. Sure you had to stack it, but I had to pay for it!*

Never a thank you. Never a word of appreciation that because of Clay's labor he could sit in his chair by the fireplace and keep his stinking feet warm.

The fir wood pile looked as large as the minute it had arrived. Clay reached down and grabbed a piece in each hand. He took two steps to the left and looked for a place on the stack that could accept the size and shape of what he had in his hands. He didn't see any options and tossed the two into a third small pile. He'd deal with

these uncooperative pieces later. He walked back to the pile, grabbed another two pieces and placed them onto the stack. Over and over again he repeated the process.

The gray October light was fading. It was late afternoon, and not much daylight was left. It was a race against the clock now. He had to get all the fir stacked today. Sunday he could attack the oak pile. Fortunately, that would go quickly. Oak logs were a lot easier and faster to stack than scrap fir.

To add insult to injury, drizzle had begun to fall from the leaden sky about a half hour ago. Clay's feet were cold and damp, his hands had been numb for hours, and he felt a chill come overtake his body as his sweatshirt soaked up the moisture. The dreaming of game-winning shots from the perimeter, and pretty cheerleaders rushing to embrace him in victory had faded several hours ago. He wasn't thinking of anything now. His mind slipped into a protective void absent of any thought. Well, not totally clear of thought. A hatred for Vic burned there.

Vic was due back from work today about 5:30. He was seldom in a good mood when he got home. Clay knew better than to not have the fir stacked by then. The stack would be inspected.

The problem with making the third pile of highly irregular pieces is that at some point Clay had to deal with them. Here he stood in the failing daylight, cold, tired, and challenged by the fifty or so pieces at his feet.

He briefly thought about hiding the pieces all over the vacant lot but thought better of it. There was too many pieces. So, one by one he added the pieces to his stack, forming the last two layers on the stack. He did it. He was done! He stepped back about ten feet from the stack and looked at it. Pretty good. Wasn't leaning. The top didn't look very neat because of the irregular pieces, but what the heck. Those pieces would be the first to get chopped up into kindling anyway.

Car lights came up the street and turned into the driveway. Vic was home.

Clay was anxious but also proud of this accomplishment. He had stacked all the fir in time.

Vic stepped out of his car and walked directly toward Clay. It was still drizzling, and just enough light remained to be able to see the wood stack and remaining pile.

“When was the wood delivered?” he demanded without even preliminary greeting.

“About noon,” Clay replied.

“What have you been doing all day?”

“Stacking wood.” The flames of rage started to swell within him.

“It’s after 5:30 and you just finished one pile?” “What did you do, go inside and watch TV for a while?”

Here came the rage like uncontrolled vomit. “No! I didn’t watch TV. I’ve been stacking this stupid fir all afternoon!”

“Don’t you talk to me in that tone of voice!” Vic threatened.

Clay stood there glaring at his step-father. He dared to clench his fists knowing Vic couldn’t see them in the darkness.

Vic stepped forward and looked at the stack of fir.

Pointing at the stack and staring back at Clay he growled, “You call that a stack?”

“Yeah,” Clay said a bit too defiantly.

“It’s a mess. Probably going to fall over any minute.”

“No, it’s stable. The top looks funny because . . .” Vic cut him off in mid-sentence.

“Don’t you talk back to me, boy!” He stepped angrily behind the stack and pushed. The top half of the stack fell forward onto the ground at Clay’s feet.

“I thought you said it was stable! Does that look stable to you?” he asked, pointing to the pile in front of Clay.

Clay didn’t answer.

“I asked you a question. Answer it,” Vic demanded, his face distorted in rage.

As usual in these situations no explanation was allowed. No defense was permitted. There was only one answer that would get Vic off Clay’s back and defuse the situation.

“No,” was all he could say, and it took every last ounce of his strength to make the word sound sincere.

Vic stepped in front of Clay, glared down at him and pointed to the stack.

“Stack it over again. Do it right this time.” Vic turned and walked back to the house, to his comfortable chair, a stinking pipe, and a roaring fireplace.

CHAPTER 13

The rich aroma of freshly ground coffee beans circled his head like a pungent, invisible cloud. Clay stood staring at the impressive espresso machine but not really seeing it. He was lost in thought. The events of the past two days and the difficult days ahead weighed heavily on his mind.

The whirring sound of the grinder suddenly stopped, and Clay snapped to as if some hypnotist had just commanded “wake up” to end his spell on Clay.

Now fully aware that he was standing in the kitchen of ADB while employees wandered in and out, he took a deep breath and brought his full attention back to the present.

The expensive Swiss-made espresso machine was automatically brewing Clay’s first cappuccino of the day. The beans had finished grinding, and now the double shot of espresso was pouring into his mug with the perfect crema. Soon an equal amount of steamed milk would pour from the machine, followed by the same volume of foamed milk to top it off.

The espresso machine was a real luxury, and a huge hit with clients and employees. Clay calculated that the device cost approximately three times as much as the car he drove in college. Yep, he’d come a long way since then. So why didn’t he feel better about it?

With a polite beep, the machine signaled it had completed its task. Clay grabbed his mug, smiled at the perfectness of the drink he was about to enjoy, and walked briskly to his office.

It was just 8:30 as he sat down at his desk. Looking out the door at the office he knew only about half the employees were here. The other half would arrive over the next hour. He picked up his

phone and touched the extension for Sheryl. She picked up immediately.

“Good morning, boss, didn’t see you come in,” she said in her warm, friendly voice.

“Good morning, Sheryl. I’m ready when you are.” Clay signaled to Sheryl that he was ready to review his schedule for the day and set priorities. Once set, Sheryl would keep him to the schedule and prevent anything, or anyone, from disrupting it. He liked to joke that she was his Calendar Cop.

She walked in carrying her notebook computer and sat in front of his desk.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said with real concern in her voice. “Do you feel okay?”

Clay didn’t think his shaky state of mind was visible on the outside. What was he going to say? Couldn’t tell the truth that he had searched for some boogey man in his house all night.

“It’s cool. Just haven’t slept well the past two nights. And speaking of tossing and turning, any messages from Lazzr this morning?”

“Nothing. Suzette hasn’t come in yet either, in case you wondered.”

“Let me know when she does. No need to set up a meeting. I just want to know when she’s in the office.”

“Right.”

“Here’s what I have going on today. Oh, before I forget, on Wednesday I have a 4:30 meeting outside the office and I won’t be returning. I haven’t put it on my shared calendar yet, so you don’t see it yet.”

Sheryl made a note. He could see the wheels turning in that attractive head of hers. He knew she was curious about the offsite meetings in his calendar that didn’t have a place or person listed. Two mysterious meetings at the same time in the same week. Must be driving her crazy trying to figure them out. He vowed to himself to tell her—someday.

“Today, my priorities are Lazzr and setting up a Partner meeting for Thursday. I also want to see Gerald to go over the books.” Gerald was ADB’s controller.

“Okay. I have a request from the Yukon Air team to review their campaign proposal with you. Can you work that in?”

“Absolutely!” Clay was extremely proud of the work his shop did for the regional airline. In the past two years, the fledging airline had grown its market share by 24 percent because of the agency’s brilliant strategy and creative execution.

“I’ll give you until 10:30 to deal with Lazzr. As for the Partner meeting . . .” she tapped the keyboard on her notebook to display the schedules of George, Suzette, and Clay. “You’re in luck. Three to five is open.”

“Perfect. End of the day is good. Book it and send the meeting notifications. Subject is: ‘Partner meeting continuation’”. Sheryl stopped typing and looked up at Clay.

Somewhere between hurt and angry, she said, “You know, I could help you better if I knew what the heck was going on! You have mysterious meetings offsite; you call a Partner meeting without a specific topic. What’s up? Don’t you trust me?”

Clay stared back at her. He wanted to tell her everything, but couldn’t. Not yet.

“Sorry, and you’re right. Please trust me that I will reveal what is prudent to reveal at the right time.” That answer didn’t appease her, so Clay continued. “The offsite meetings are personal. That’s all you need to know for now. As for the partner meeting, I deliberately don’t want a descriptive subject that everyone with access to our calendars can see. You know the nature of the financial discussions we’ve been having. You already know more than anyone else here except George’s admin. No sense worrying the troops.”

Sheryl had helped him prepare his slides for the last partner meeting, so she knew the tough financial situation. The topic of being acquired by Pitt Needham Group was not in the slides then, nor would it be on Thursday. That topic had to remain top secret.

“All right, I just scheduled the Partner meeting for 3 p.m. on Thursday. As for today, you’re working on Lazzr until 10:30. I’ll book the Yukon team for 10:30 in the Ogilvy conference room. I’ll book a working lunch with you and Gerald until 1 p.m. You’ll have all afternoon to work on preparing for the Partner meeting.” The Calendar Cop had spoken.

“That’s perfect, Sheryl. Thanks.”

She left his office, leaving Clay alone to think about what he had to do next—call Loretta at Lazzr.

Three short blasts from an air horn in the distance split the morning silence. Clay turned to the window in time to see a beautiful sloop, easily sixty feet in length, slowly power its way eastward up the canal toward the Fremont bridge, its horn requesting that the bridge open. The three short blasts from the yacht were answered by one long and one short blast from the bridge tender acknowledging the request. Soon, Clay knew, the steel drawbridge would slowly open to permit the sailboat to pass while dozens of angry drivers sat in their cars on both sides of the bridge impatiently waiting for the bridge to close again.

Clay ran his eyes over the sleek yacht. He briefly pictured himself behind the wheel of the gleaming vessel but the pleasant vision ended abruptly. He heard a voice in the back of his mind say, “don’t kid yourself.”

CHAPTER 14

Clay busied himself by organizing his desk, scanning his news feed and checking email. He started to click on ESPN.com to check the latest college football news. *Stop it! You are procrastinating. Stupid dork!*

Guilty on all accounts. He had been finding things to do just to avoid calling Loretta. An internal battle was already raging inside Clay. The optimist was presenting a case for why Lazzr would hold the course and remain with ADB. In the agency's favor was a record of consistent results and the friendship between Clay and Loretta. The pessimist side of Clay had a case, too. Once trust is shattered, as Clay believed it had been with Suzette's odd time table, the game is over. Desperate companies (and Lazzr was desperate) start reaching for miracle cures. They decide "a change is required that is more aligned to their future market challenges . . . A fresh approach with new ideas . . ."

Get a grip and make the call.

Clay reached for his desk phone and punched speed dial for Loretta's office at Lazzr.

After four rings an automated voice greeting said, "Thanks for calling Lazzr. If you know your party's extension you may dial it now." Clay was surprised. The number he had dialed went directly to Loretta's office. If Loretta didn't pick up, her admin did. This time the call went to the automated receptionist.

He hung up and checked the number for Loretta against the main office number for Lazzr to confirm the numbers were different. He punched the autodial again. Four rings, "Thanks for calling Lazzr . . ."

She must have changed her number, he reasoned. Thinking back, he realized that most of his conversations with her were by cell, not to her office phone. Clay interrupted the annoying automated voice by punching “0” on his phone to get to a human being.

“Lazzr Corporation, this is Anna, how can I help you?”

“Hi, Anna, sorry to bother you, but I was trying to place a direct call to Loretta, and the phone number I have for her must not be valid anymore. Please connect me.”

A brief pause, then Anna said, “Oh, Loretta is no longer with Lazzr. Today was her last day. Is there anyone else I can connect you with?”

Clay couldn’t speak. He wasn’t prepared for this scenario. It hadn’t been even a possibility in his mind. All he could mutter before hanging up was, “No.”

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot. What the heck is going on around here?

He picked up his cell phone off the desk and dialed Loretta’s cell.

“Hi, Clay, I wondered when I was going to hear from you. Actually I was about to give you a call.”

“What the heck happened?”

“I was fired. Well, technically I was asked to resign. Effective immediately.”

“Are they crazy? You’re a rock star.”

“Not in their eyes. Not after the campaign proposal ADB gave us,” the edge of bitterness in her voice was unmistakable.

“They fired you because of Suzette’s time strategy?”

“It’s more complicated than that, but yeah.”

Clay walked over to his office door and shut it. This conversation required privacy.

“Who else knows this outside of Lazzr?” Clay asked, his mind now getting into gear after the initial shock.

“I haven’t told anyone except my husband. I wanted to speak with you first.”

“I appreciate the courtesy. I’ll break the news here. Were you and Suzette scheduled for a call today?”

“Yeah, I was to call her at 10:30 with feedback from Reggie and Charlotte.”

Clay glanced at his watch. It was 10:05. “Okay, don’t call. Let me talk to her. Tell me what happened at dinner with Reggie and Charlotte.”

“It started out great, as usual. I briefed them on the campaign strategy. They weren’t blown away by it but didn’t hate it either. I thought their reaction was unusually reserved.”

“Unusually reserved? What do you mean?”

“You’ve been around Reggie and Charlotte, so you know that they get excited about new ideas. Last night the usual level of energy just wasn’t there. I think they were disappointed. They told me that they were expecting a really big idea and they didn’t get it. Then they took turns ranting about how marketing has been letting the company down. This took me by total surprise.”

“Let the company down? No way. Did you point out the market share gains, the cover articles on Wired and Inc. magazines, the . . .” Loretta cut him off.

“Of course I did, but the more proof I presented, the more entrenched they became in their warped view of the situation. Charlotte even looked me in the eyes and said, ‘all that is yesterday’s news, Loretta. We need leadership and a plan to take us to the next level. This strategy doesn’t do that.’”

“I couldn’t disagree more, Loretta. We presented a sound and bold plan.”

“I agree with you. It was the right strategy except for the timing.”

“What did they say about the schedule?”

“Nothing. The plan was being rejected. Heck, everyone in marketing was being rejected at this point, so I wasn’t going to add gasoline to the fire by talking about the schedule. Unfortunately, Reggie asked me point blank how soon the campaign could start. So I laid out for them Suzette’s strategy of waiting several months. That’s really when the excrement hit the fan!”

Clay had been pacing back and forth in his office during the conversation, but he suddenly felt very tired. He collapsed into one of the chairs and put his feet on the coffee table. “And then . . .” Clay asked, knowing that a lot more was coming.

“Reggie and Charlotte looked at each other and then at me. It was as if some encrypted signal had just passed between them. Then Reggie gives me the ‘it’s time for fresh leadership speech.’ Charlotte acknowledged my past contribution, but said firmly that they had decided a change of leadership and agency was necessary to take the company to the next level.”

“A clean sweep,” said Clay gloomily.

“Yep. It’s funny though. Now that I’ve gone over the conversation several times it’s clear to me that they were set on making a change before we had dinner. I think they were prepared to pull the plug on the marketing department and ADB no matter what.”

“Sounds that way. I’m really surprised I haven’t received a call from Reggie by now.”

“Me too. And you haven’t heard anything from Suzette either have you?”

“No. She wasn’t in the office when I got here. I’ll talk to her as soon as we hang up. Two questions before I let you go, Loretta.”

“Shoot.”

“I know it’s early and you’re still in shock, but any ideas about you want to do next?”

“None. I’m still processing all of this, honestly. They gave me a good severance package, so I’m going to take some time off and figure out next steps.”

“Recruiters will be burning up your phone within 48 hours, Loretta. Heck, if I could right now I’d bring you into ADB.”

“I appreciate the kind thoughts, Clay. Let me cool my jets for a while though. Grant and I haven’t had a real vacation in over two years. I think we’re going to disappear and refocus. What was the second question?”

“Who’s the lucky agency?”

“They dodged the question when I asked. Charlotte said an announcement would be made when the time was right. Reggie said it wasn’t a local shop. That’s all I know. This has been in the works for some time I think. You know how plugged in I am to industry gossip. There hasn’t been any hint of a change. Frankly, I am more than a little pissed and hurt that they’ve been working behind my back.”

“Loretta, looks like both of our lives have changed today. Do me a favor and when you’re back from vacation let me know how I can help you.”

“Definitely. Take care and good luck.”

“Bye, my friend.” Clay tapped the phone to disconnect the call. He tapped his Contacts app, searched for Loretta, and edited the record to remove the company name, company address, company phone, and company email. She wasn’t a client anymore. Just a friend. He hoped.

It was 10:20. If he missed the 10:30 with the Yukon Air team they would be devastated. Yet, he had to talk to Suzette before she tried to call Loretta at 10:30.

He opened his office door. Sheryl was at her desk and turned to him when she heard the door open.

A short nod of his head invited her into his office.

“Okay, here’s the skinny. Confidential for now. Loretta is gone from Lazzr, and we’re going to be fired at any minute. I am the only one at ADB that has this information right now. At least I think so. Please contact the Yukon team and ask for a 15-minute delay until 10:45.”

“Consider it done.”

“And get Suzette in here right now.”

Sheryl nodded her head and briskly walked out the door on a mission.

Clay felt terrible and didn’t know why. He wasn’t ill but felt deflated. His office seemed to grow around him as if he was getting smaller. One of his prized accounts had rejected his firm and was going to hire another agency. Some unknown agency that in some way was better than ADB. Some distant agency who had a president that was better than Clay.

His company, his very heart, and soul, was in danger of sinking and he felt powerless to stop it.

CHAPTER 15

A tapping on the door brought Clay out of his trance.

“You wanted to see me, Clay?” asked Suzette.

“Yes, good morning. What do you hear from Lazzr?” Clay decided to play his cards close to the vest. Behind his smiling face and warm eyes, he was intently studying every word, every blink, every mannerism of his junior partner.

“Nothing, but I’m scheduled to call Loretta in a few minutes to set up the next steps.”

Clay couldn’t see anything unusual. There wasn’t any sign of nervousness. On the contrary, there was an outward confidence.

“Suzette, you know that Loretta and I go way back.”

“Yeah, you went to college.”

“We did. We became friends there. Stayed in touch after graduation. It was because of that friendship and trust that she reached out to me when she was brought on board at Lazzr to be their CMO. She wanted us. Didn’t want to do an agency search.”

“Right, I’m aware of the story.” Suzette’s attitude shifted suddenly. A look of impatience flooded her face, and she even glanced nervously at her watch. “It’s 10:30. I need to call her. What was it you wanted to talk about? Is this supposed to be a reminder about how attached you are to Lazzr and Loretta? I mean, I get it, okay? But don’t forget that you brought me into the agency specifically to lead the Lazzr account. It was me that sealed the deal.”

Suzette’s impatience transformed quickly into bitterness and defensiveness. The reaction surprised Clay. This was the third time in as many meetings that Suzette had spoken sharply to him.

“It was definitely a team effort that won the account. No doubt about it.” Clay took the high road to avoid further distractions. It was time to get to the point. “You don’t need to call Loretta.”

Suzette’s head flinched. “Huh, why?”

“Because when you call her number no one will answer.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Loretta was fired last night.” He delivered the news and studied her face.

“What? How is that possible? What for?” Suzette was visibly shaken. Clay couldn’t tell if the reaction was real or really good acting.

“She had dinner with Reggie and Charlotte Monday night to brief them on the campaign strategy. They didn’t like the plan. Told her that her services weren’t required anymore.” Clay didn’t continue. He wanted to hear Suzette’s next questions. He hoped he could unlock some of the mystery around here based on the questions she asked.

He noticed that she had regained her composure after the initial shock. Her look of confidence that bordered on arrogance had returned.

“But it was a brilliant plan. She must not have sold it well. I should have been there,” she reasoned.

Interesting response, he thought. All about her plan. How she could have sold it. Nothing about a concern for Loretta. And why didn’t she ask the most obvious question about ADB’s status as agency of record?

“According to Loretta, the founders didn’t think the plan represented a big enough idea to take the company to the next level.”

There. He saw something in her eyes. The same flash of hatred he saw on Monday in the conference room. The angry spark vanished, replaced by her usual cold brown eyes. “Well, the idiots are wrong. They wouldn’t know a great plan if it hit them in the face.”

Clay was fascinated, yet also alarmed. Right now Suzette wasn’t talking with Clay about getting a meeting with Lazzr, ironing out the differences, revising the plan and moving forward. That was the type of thinking one had when trying to salvage an account.

Instead, all she could do was act offended that the client hadn't seen the brilliance of her plan. Instantly he knew what needed to be done, but he needed a little time and a private conversation with George first. For the moment though, he needed to drop the other shoe and tell Suzette that ADB was going to be fired.

Clay's desk phone buzzed. He knew that Sheryl wouldn't bother him unless it was important.

"Excuse me, Suzette. This call must be important. Please wait." Suzette looked a little bored and sat down in one of the chairs. She immediately started viewing email on her tablet.

Clay picked up the phone, "What's up?" he asked his assistant through the handset.

"Reggie from Lazzr is on line two for you."

"Okay." Clay punched line two on his phone. "Good morning, Reggie. Feels like a day of transition, doesn't it?" Clay wanted Reggie to know that he was on top of the situation, but he didn't want to sound defensive. After all, Loretta was gone, but the axe hadn't fallen yet on ADB. Clay made himself comfortable in his desk chair and faced forward so he could watch Suzette.

"Indeed, it is a time of transition, Clay. That's the reason for my call. You know of course that Loretta has resigned."

"Yes, I spoke with her this morning. I didn't see it coming."

"We think it's all for the best. The entire Lazzr team thanks her for her contribution and wishes her well," Reggie said, sounding like the news release they had undoubtedly been writing this morning.

Clay decided to take the offensive and charge the machine gun.

"Reggie, you can rest assured that ADB is in gear and ready to implement the new plan. In fact, Suzette is in my office right now. We were discussing the situation. In the interim, we can interface directly with you or Charlotte. I assume you'll be looking for a new CMO, but that'll take some time." Clay noticed that Suzette was staring at her tablet, but her fingers weren't moving as they would if she was actively reviewing emails and text messages. She hadn't even looked up when Clay mentioned her name.

"Clay, that won't be necessary. You see, Charlotte and I believe that what Lazzr needs right now are fresh ideas; a different perspective on the market. We're beginning to compete with some

very established and well-financed companies. We believe, and the Board agrees, that a complete change of marketing direction is required.”

“Sounds like you’re firing us, Reggie.”

Suzette looked up from her tablet. Her expression was oddly blank.

“I don’t like to use that term, Clay, but just to be clear we are terminating our agreement with ADB effective in sixty days. You’ll have the official termination notice from our attorney before the end of the day.”

“Is there anything I can say or do to change your mind? ADB has done some amazingly effective work for Lazzr.”

“The decision has been made, and we’re moving on. I know that sounds cold. I want you to know that the Board greatly appreciates your contribution.”

Clay swallowed hard. This guy was beginning to piss him off. Right now he had to be professional and play nice, but what he wanted to do was call Reggie a two-faced lying bag of crap.

“We’ve greatly valued and enjoyed the association with Lazzr. We’ll work to make the transition smooth, of course.” It was time for *the* question. “Who is the new agency?” Clay was looking down at his desk pretending to take notes. In his peripheral vision, he continued to watch Suzette.

“No decision yet. We’re reviewing shops. The right chemistry is really important to us.”

“Of course, it is,” Clay said in a facetious tone meant to let Reggie know that Clay had heard enough of his B.S. “I’ll look for the termination letter this afternoon. If you’re planning on issuing a news release that refers to ADB in any way, I’ll need to review it in advance. And I’ll make sure your accounting department receives our invoices in a timely fashion over the next sixty days so we can make the transition cleanly. Agreed?”

“Oh, sure. That’s fine. Thanks for your contribution. Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you or ADB. Bye.” Reggie hung up without waiting for Clay to say another word.

Clay wrote a few notes about the conversation then looked up.

Suzette was looking directly at him. Her face showed no sign of emotion whatsoever. No concern. No anger. No worry. For someone who had just lost her largest account, she was oddly cool, calm and collected.

“Well, you heard. We’ve been fired. Sixty days from now we remove Lazzr from our client list.”

“I better tell the team,” Suzette volunteered.

“Absolutely not!” Clay fired back. “You’ll say nothing to anyone until the end of the day. I’ll tell George later this morning. Is that understood?”

“Sure, but I’m going to be asked. The team knows I was to talk with Loretta this morning.”

“Tell them the truth. You couldn’t reach her.” Clay looked at his watch. He had one minute to get to the Ogilvy conference room and his meeting with the Yukon team.

CHAPTER 16

Somehow Clay had been able to put Lazzr, Suzette, Loretta, and Reggie out of his mind while he walked to the Ogilvy conference room on the other side of the office. When he stepped into the room at precisely 10:45 everyone was already seated. Easels at the front of the room were covered. The video projector was running. It was showtime.

For the next forty minutes, the team presented their research, strategy and creative concepts for the next Yukon Air campaign. The airline wasn't ADB's largest account, but it was its most visible account. The agency's creative had not only raised the airline's market share over the past three years but had attracted at least three other pieces of new business to the agency. It was a gem of an account.

At 11:25 the presentation was over. Clay stood and walked to the front of the room. He looked around the table and said nothing. Eager faces looked back. Clay raised his hands and clapped. While he clapped, his head nodded up and down as if to say, "You guys nailed it."

"Awesome work, everyone. Truly awesome. Looks like you're ready for the presentation on Thursday. Call me as soon as you can." The team was flying to Anchorage on Wednesday night and presenting to Yukon on Thursday.

Clay left the meeting room in high spirits once again. He loved it when a plan came together. The strategy, the creative, the media. He thought about the team members on Yukon. He had to find a way to keep them. Two of them also worked on Lazzr, however. Everyone on the Lazzr account was at risk of losing their job.

That brought him to the topic of the next meeting with Gerald, his Controller. Clay walked by the kitchen and was tempted to make a cappuccino, except he remembered that lunch was being brought in for Gerald and himself.

When Clay entered his office, Gerald was already there, seated at the work table in the far end of the office. Two bags with their lunch were also on the table.

He closed his office door and greeted Gerald.

“Good morning, Gerald. Are the numbers adding up today?” Clay almost always greeted Gerald this way. He knew it slightly annoyed his too-serious accountant.

“Hi, Clay. No, they don’t add up. Seems one column is bigger than the other column.”

Clay laughed. “Good one, Gerald, you’ve been practicing your humor. Hey, one minute before we get started.” Clay picked up his office phone and dialed Sheryl’s extension.

“Sheryl, thanks for the lunch. Please hunt down George and get him on the phone right away. You might have to call his cell. I think he had contractors at his house this morning.”

Clay hung up, and sat down across from Gerald at the table.

For Clay, a working lunch meant eating then working. So, he and Gerald made short talk while they finished their gyro sandwiches.

Clay had just swallowed his late bite when the phone rang. He stood and answered it.

“Hey, George. Thanks for calling. I have some bad news. Lazzr just fired us and Loretta. They said she resigned, but I talked with her first thing this morning, and she was forced to walk the plank. Leaving wasn’t her idea.”

Gerald stopped chewing and immediately opened his notebook to study a spreadsheet. *Smart man*, Clay thought. *He’s calculating the damage while I’m on the phone.*

George angrily said, “That’s the last thing we need right now. I’m shocked. Who knows?”

“At ADB, just you, me, Suzette, Sheryl. I ordered Suzette in no uncertain terms to not tell anyone. We have some tough decisions to

make, partner. I'm here with Gerald right now to crunch the numbers."

"Good," replied George. "I'll be in the office in a couple of hours. Let's connect then. We need to make the announcement before it leaks."

"Agreed. Talk to you later. Bye." Clay hung up the phone and walked back to the table. Gerald's fingers were flying across the keyboard as data flowed into the spreadsheet.

"I guess you know now why I wanted to meet with you this morning, Gerald. Let me remind you that what you just heard cannot be shared with anyone before George and I can make the announcement."

"Of course. Uh, Clay, we were on shaky financial ground before losing Lazzr. Now the ground is turning to mud. The situation isn't sustainable."

"I know. Give me the details, in executive-speak, not accountant-speak please."

Gerald frowned while his eyes scanned the reports on his computer.

As you know, we've been burning through cash reserves this year as expenses have exceeded billings by roughly \$20,000 a month. We're down to \$50,000 in the bank. Not much to fall back on considering we need \$500,000 a month to keep the lights on."

"What's our receivables?" Clay asked.

"This month \$480,00. Next month and the month after it will fall to about \$390,000 because of Lazzr."

"Don't make me do the math, Gerald."

"We're looking at a loss of \$240,000 over the next three months."

The immensity of the number made Clay's head spin.

"Ok, you already know my next question. Tell me."

"Twelve people. And all can't be junior level. The savings won't be enough."

"We cut twelve people, and we're back in the black in four months?" Clay asked.

Gerald looked back at the computer screen. "No, but we're breaking even with some reserves remaining."

Clay stood and paced around the office, thinking. He looked out the window as a rusty barge and its slightly less rusty tug worked their way down the canal.

“Work a few scenarios for me, Gerald. In the first scenario, we let go everyone we’ve hired since December. I think that was around ten people. In the second scenario, everyone on the Lazzr account goes. The third isn’t really a full scenario. More of an option. What if the partners didn’t take a salary for the next three months? Got that?”

“Sure, one question about the second scenario. You said everyone on the Lazzr account. There’s only five total people on the account. That won’t get us to the number we need.”

“Gerald, I said everyone on Lazzr. There are six.”

Gerald looked up from the computer and right at Clay.

“You want me to include Suzette? She’s a partner.”

“Gerald, I have to consider all our options, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, of course.” He looked back down at the computer screen.

“After you work up the scenarios, if another one comes to mind please present it, too. But, Gerald, I need your magic in two hours, and you have to be completely discreet.”

“You can count on me,” Gerald said while snapping closed his notebook.

Gerald opened the office door to leave. Clay said, “We’ll be all right. Don’t worry.”

Clay stood alone in his office. He was suddenly very tired. Fatigue crashed down on him like a wet mattress. He needed a break. Needed some air. He grabbed his coat.

“Sheryl, I’m going to take a walk. Won’t be long. I have my cell. Call me when George comes in.”

“Ok,” she said as her boss walked down the hall toward the exit.

Outside it was a typical winter day in Seattle. Damp and cold. No sun was visible as dark gray clouds scudded overhead. Clay walked from the office toward the trail that paralleled the canal. In a park, just before the trail, he stopped at a concrete step to retie the laces on his left shoe. He sat briefly on the chilly concrete. The urban

park was a very attractive and functional combination of wide concrete steps and terraces of well-manicured grass.

He studied the recently mowed lawn on each terrace. Every section of grass had perfectly trimmed edges. The wheel indentations from the mower were still visible in the grass. Clay couldn't help but notice that each set of wheel marks was perfectly straight.

Shoe retied, Clay stood to continue his walk. But the second he stood he felt light-headed. Blood seemed to have drained from his brain. He paused, waiting for the discomfort to pass. Out of nowhere, the weight of two gigantic hands on his shoulders pushed him back down to the cold concrete step.

It was a sparkling clear day. The clouds and rain from the past week had vanished to reveal a marvelous spring morning. Perfect weather for eight-year-old Clay to ride his bike through the neighborhood, inventing the type of imaginary adventures only a young boy could create.

Clay brushed his teeth after breakfast, put on his sneakers, and raced out the door to get his red Schwinn in the garage.

Entering the garage through the side door, he noticed right away that the main garage door was open. He wasn't alone. Standing there by the immense, cluttered work bench was Vic.

Clay reached for his bike and started to lift the kickstand with his foot.

Vic looked up from the project on his bench and glared at his stepson through squinting eyes fighting a losing battle against the stinging smoke of a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. "Where do you think you're going?" Vic demanded.

"Ride my bike," replied Clay.

"I didn't give you permission to ride your bike."

"I asked Mommy. She said it was okay."

Vic's glare suddenly transformed into a look of anger.

"I don't care what your Mommy said. You didn't ask me if you could play."

Clay felt like a ping-pong ball between two paddles. He couldn't think. All he could do was look down at the garage floor. He noticed to his relief that the garage floor was clean that day.

“Well, did you?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, sir, I didn’t ask you if I could play. I asked Mommy if . . .”

“Don’t talk back to me!” Vic said strongly. His eyes were beginning to bulge slightly in his growing anger. He was breathing faster, too.

Clay desperately wanted away from here. Couldn’t he just become invisible and walk right out the door? If only he could shrink to the size of a mouse and hide under some shelves. Anything to avoid the verbal lashings he was taking.

“Well, you’re not going to ride your bike today. It’s time you started to help more around the house. Do you think it’s right that you should play all day while your mother and I work? Answer me!”

There was only one acceptable answer. “No, sir.”

“We work hard all week to put clothes on your back and food in your belly. Then we work on weekends to take care of the house, so you have a roof over your head at night. All you care about is playing with your little friends. Don’t you think that’s being selfish?”

There was only one right answer in this line of interrogation.

“Yes, sir.”

Vic smothered his cigarette in an old tuna can on the bench and lit another, all the while never taking eyes off Clay, who stood there looking down at the garage floor, one hand still on the bike’s handlebars. One hand still grasping a dream of escape.

“I have news for you. Today you’re helping me in the yard. And if you don’t work hard today, you can forget about riding that bike for a full week. Understand?”

Clay felt like he was in some terrible whirlpool that was pulling him down, down, down.

“Answer me, boy!” Vic demanded.

“I understand,” Clay said weakly.

“Good. Now take your hands off that darn bike and come over here. You’re going to mow the lawn.”

Clay’s house was in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Medford, a small sawmill town in southern Oregon. The neighborhood consisted of small, single-story homes. Most of the

homes were well-maintained by their owners who may not have had much money but were proud of their little part of the American dream. Houses were freshly painted, lawns green and manicured. Nearly every house had a flower bed or two in the front yard, and everyone, except the divorced man down the street, had a hanging basket of petunias by the front door.

Clay's house was different. It sat on a corner lot. The house was larger, and the yard was easily twice the size of other lots. That meant more lawn to mow, more flower beds to trim and weed.

And today was the day that eight-year-old Clay was going to be taught how to mow that lawn. His disappointment in not being able to ride his bike partially faded away. He was going to mow the lawn! He was going to use a power mower just like the older kids did!

Vic muscled the heavy Briggs & Stratton reel lawn mower out of its storage area in the corner of the garage next to the work bench. "Come over here and watch. How do you expect to learn anything?"

Clay walked closer to the mower, not knowing what to expect, or what to do.

With the lit cigarette still dangling from his mouth, Vic flipped the choke lever on the carburetor. He fiddled with the clutch to make certain it was disengaged. Placing a foot on top of the mower's tire, he reached down for the starter cord and pulled upward violently. The 2.5 horsepower engine sputtered and stopped. Vic pulled the starter cord again. And again. It wouldn't start.

Breathing harder now, Vic closed the choke and pulled the wooden handle connected to the starter cord one more time. The engine roared to life like an angry monster awakened from sleep. Clay pulled back in response to the volume. The sound was amplified inside the garage walls. Vic pivoted the mower around, so it faced outside. Before Clay knew what was happening, Vic had engaged the drive of the mower and was steering it out of the garage toward the front yard.

Clay walked behind not knowing what else to do.

Vic positioned the mower at a corner where the dirt driveway, dirt street, and green grass intersected. He impatiently signaled that Clay should step closer. Over the growling sound of the mower, now in neutral, Vic started the lesson.

“Pay attention. This lever controls your speed. Pull it back to go faster. Push it forward to slow down. This lever makes the blades turn or stop. Pull back to make the blades turn. Push forward to make them stop. Now, walk with me and watch.”

Vic pulled back on the throttle with his right hand; with his left hand, he pulled back on the clutch. The mower moved forward with blades spinning and cut grass spitting out behind the machine. Clay walked alongside, watching. Looked simple enough. Just walk behind the mower. At the end of the lawn where a sidewalk marked the other boundary of the property, Vic spun the mower clockwise in a smooth pivot around the right tire. Before Clay knew it, Vic and mower were headed in the opposite direction cutting a new row.

When they reached the driveway, Vic executed another flawless pivot of the machine, this time around the left tire. He pushed the clutch forward, stopping the blades, and reduced the speed by pushing the lever forward to idle.

Over the noise of the idling engine, Vic gave his last instruction. “Just follow the tire mark,” he said while pointing to the long straight indentation in the grass made by the mower’s left wheel in the second cut row.

Vic stepped aside and pulled Clay behind the mower. Clay reached up to grasp the handle bar. It was at an awkward height for little Clay, just below his chin. He studied the control levers to his left and right. His eyes followed the handle down to the exhaust-belching machine that growled and vibrated in front of him. He was too excited to notice the ironic fact that the handle of the mower was like the handlebar on his bike, right down to the black rubber grips.

Vic reached down and pulled the throttle back. The engine roared. Clay’s heart raced.

“Pull the clutch,” Vic yelled over the noise of the gas engine. “Pull the clutch.”

Clay paused for a few seconds trying to remember all the instructions. He reached with his left hand and pulled the clutch cable’s lever.

Instantly the roaring machine lurched forward and to the right. Clay desperately tried to gain control as the machine rolled—no, veered widely, across the lawn. The power of the mower totally

surprised Clay. It looked so tame when Vic was operating it. Now it was all Clay could do to hang on and try to steer this demonic thing. Vic appeared from nowhere, grabbed the mower's handle and released the clutch. The machine stopped in its tracks. Clay's momentum continued forward and he hit his chin hard against the handle.

"What are you doing?" Vic screamed. "Hold onto the handle and steer it."

He pushed Clay aside and directed the mower back into a line parallel to his last row. Clay rubbed his sore chin.

"Keep the tire just inside the wheel mark. Overlap it a bit. Keep it straight!" he barked.

Clay was afraid of the mower now. He wasn't strong enough. Wasn't tall enough. It was too powerful, but he didn't have a choice. Vic increased the throttle and motioned to Clay to engage the clutch. Again, the mower leaped forward. Clay was ready this time though. He wrestled with the mower. It took all his strength and concentration to keep the mower moving forward rather than left or right. He kept his eye on the left tire's relationship to the previous tire mark in the grass. The beast of a mower had a mind of its own and kept twisting away from the line.

The sidewalk boundary of the lawn was getting closer. Clay panicked. He'd have to turn the machine around somehow. Could he do it? What was it Vic had done? Clay couldn't remember. The turning motion had been so fast and smooth. Did he reduce the speed? Did he disengage the clutch?

At the end of the row, all Clay could think to do was disengage the clutch to stop the machine. From behind him, he heard Vic screaming. "What are you doing? This is terrible. What's wrong with you?"

Clay reduced the throttle and turned around to see Vic standing in the newly cut path—his very first row of cut lawn, his first step from child to a big boy. The row was anything but straight. Gaps of uncut lawn stood between his row and Vic's last row.

Vic was furious and stormed up to Clay and the idling beast. "For crying out loud, steer the mower. Didn't you listen to a word I said?"

Vic pushed Clay aside, jerked the throttle and clutch. He spun the mower, so it was straddling the same row Clay had just cut. The right tire rested about six inches inside the tire mark from Vic's last row.

"Go over it again. Make it straight," Vic demanded, sweat dripping from his forehead.

Clay looked down the row. It wasn't straight. Not at all. He engaged the clutch and directed the mower the best he could. He locked his eyes on to the right tire. Had to keep that tire inside the other tire mark. As before, the mower had other ideas and fought him every foot. Above the roar of the engine, Clay could hear Vic screaming at him. "Keep it straight. What's the matter with you? Can't you do anything?"

The end of the row was approaching. Clay was determined to make the turn this time. Doing a good turn would make up for his crooked lines, he reckoned. At the end of the row, Clay tried to pivot the mower around the left tire as he had seen Vic do. But, instead of a complete 180-degree turn, Clay lost control of the mower, and it headed off at an angle toward the center of the lawn. Clay helplessly tried to steer the mower back to the line.

Vic raced to the mower taking over control after pushing Clay roughly aside. "Where in the heck are you going?" Vic was exploding with anger now. He left the mower idling in the middle of the lawn and grabbed Clay by the shirt sleeve. He pulled him over to the row Clay had finished cutting before the failed turn.

"Look at that row. Does that look straight to you?"

"No," Clay said, his voice breaking into a sob.

"Quit crying, you little crybaby. Watch me one more time. I'm losing my patience with you."

Vic stepped back to the mower and directed it to Clay's misaligned row. He set the left tire inside the previous row by half the width of the mower, a distance necessary to make up for the previous errors. He directed the mower across the lawn all the way to the sidewalk, spun it around, lined up the next cut with the same overlap and steered the mower back to Clay, standing defeated in the driveway.

“Look, it’s even now. Try it again, and I’d better not have to redo your work.”

And so went the remainder of the morning. Row after row, Clay tried his best to mow a straight line with the powerful mower. Though he improved, none of the rows were good enough for Vic, who’d yell and scream, then go back over each of Clay’s row to straighten them out.

The last row of the lawn had been mowed and re-mowed when Clay’s mother appeared wearing her apron calling them into the house for lunch.

Vic drove the mower back into the garage while eight-year-old Clay slowly ambled toward the back door of the house. He had tried this morning. Really tried. But he had come up short. His best efforts hadn’t been enough for Vic. His valiant attempt to control the mower row after row had only resulted in accusations of laziness and not paying attention. With head hung low in exhaustion and defeat, he studied his grass-stained sneakers shuffling through the straight rows of the freshly cut lawn. He found no satisfaction in the finished job. There was no level of excitement or sense of accomplishment from mowing his first lawn. Every tire line in the grass made by the heavy mower was a reminder that he wasn’t good enough to make those lines straight.

CHAPTER 17

Laughter and the sound of roller blades on concrete brought Clay out of his . . . out of his what? Trance? He looked around to see who behind him was responsible for rudely pushing him down to the step. No one was there. He studied the few people mingling in the park around him. Nobody was paying any attention to him. Nothing out of the ordinary. A young couple on roller blades glided past on the trail; a few Asian nerds were huddled around a notebook studying its screen intently. Others were either strolling down to the trail or coming up from it.

Clay glanced at his watch. Amazingly, only ten minutes had passed since he had left the office. He stood and started to walk. This time nothing stopped him. With the flashback still fresh in his mind, he walked over the grass terrace, hoping the dampness wouldn't hurt the leather soles of his Ferragamo Oxfords.

No wonder I live in a houseboat now, Clay thought. No lawn to mow. Vic was a real jerk all right.

Clay stepped off the lawn and onto the concrete. He headed west down the multi-purpose path called the Burke Gillman Trail.

When he left the office moments ago, he was confident that upon his return he'd know how to handle the situation back at the office. Now he wasn't so sure. He had to convince George that major and immediate layoffs were unavoidable. Some of those who had to be let go played important roles in account teams that George led. But, George was a good businessman and would see the necessity of the layoffs, even if there would be a heated debate about who would get pink slipped.

The bigger question in Clay's mind was how George would react to the recommendation that Suzette, their junior partner, also

be shown the door. George liked Suzette. *Why* Clay didn't know. Clay had watched with some amusement how Suzette had played up to George the past few months. The brown-nosing was obvious, but not to George.

Then there was the two of them taking sides against Clay on the Needham acquisition proposal. George wasn't going to easily agree to a move that weakened his voting power on such an important decision.

Clay's confidence had faded. He didn't know why. He just wasn't sure he could navigate through all the crap that lay ahead.

More troubled now than when he had left the office for his walk, Clay did an about-face and headed back to ADB.

The canal to his right was clear of any ship traffic at the moment. He could have used the pleasant distraction of nice super yacht right now. He needed something to erase the weird flashback from his mind. He needed something to take his mind off the painful decisions waiting back at the office. Instead of a pleasant distraction, he got an empty canal, and the rain started to fall again.

Clay's phone buzzed. The caller ID told him it was Sheryl. He kept walking briskly back to the office to get out of the rain.

"Hey, Sheryl. I'm on my way back," Clay said.

"Good, because George just got here. He'll see you in your office at 1:30."

"Perfect. Thanks. Uh, is Suzette in?"

"Yes. Last I saw she was eating a salad in her office," the ever-observant assistant responded.

"Ask her to join George and I at 3:00. And be sure that Gerald is my office at 1:30, too."

"Right. Gerald at 1:30. Suzette at 3:00," Sheryl repeated and hung up.

At the last intersection before the ADB office, Clay hesitated briefly as the crosswalk light said *Wait* in red letters. The rain intensified. Clay looked up and down the street. He dashed across against the light and didn't slow down until he was inside the building lobby. *Stupid not to have taken an umbrella.*

Clay decided to take the elevator rather than the stairs but didn't know why exactly. Something about the solitude of the

gleaming elevator promised comfort to him. He realized that he was thinking more about the lawn mowing flashback than the decision he and George had to make to lay off twelve people. The memory of being yelled at for not being able to mow a straight line continued to haunt him as he rode the elevator up to the top floor.

Clay acknowledged the receptionist with a nod as he stepped from the elevator and walked directly to the men's room to dry off and pull himself together. He was relieved to see that he was the only one in the room to see him like this.

Clay's hair was a wet and tangled mess. That was to be expected. A few paper towels and a comb would fix the hair. But, what shocked him were his eyes. The eyes that stared back at him from the mirror were not the eyes of a confident, talented founder of the best marketing agency in the Northwest. These were the blue eyes of a hurt little boy.

He shook his head and blinked hard as if that would reset his eyes back to normal. His hands started to shake, and he felt a little dizzy. He turned on the cold-water faucet and splashed water on his face, a face already damp from the rain. Again and again, his hands carried the cold water to his face. He looked in the mirror. *That's more like it.* The little boy eyes were gone.

He jerked several paper towels from the dispenser and dried his hair and face. He guided a comb carefully through the tangled hair wishing there was a hair dryer in this restroom like in the men's locker room downstairs. No problem. It was Seattle. Nothing unusual about seeing someone with wet hair. His wool sports coat was very wet, so he took it off and shook it to remove some of the water that hadn't soaked in yet.

Hair combed, jacket on, Clay took one last look in the mirror. Clay looked back at him. *Showtime!*

Author's note: You've reached the end of your free 17-chapter excerpt. Thanks for reading.

Clay's adventures are just beginning, but will Sheryl be able to overcome her own fears to guide him? The story takes several sharp turns from this point forward. Best to buckle up.

Books by Charles Besondy



The following books are in the Clay Austin Series. Each is a standalone work of Christian fiction; however, I suggest the best reading experience may be had by reading the books in the order below.

Please join my monthly newsletter email list for advance notices of upcoming works and free chapters. Sign up at www.CharlesBesondy.com. All versions of these titles are available on Amazon.

“The Hidden Saboteur”

A Christian Psychological Thriller

(Two-time literary award winner for Christian fiction, 2020)

Clay Austin’s Career Was Taking Off.
Then The Nightmares Took Over.

Dare to venture inside the head and life of a man caught in a spiritual battle.

No place is safe for Clay. He is besieged. Voices from the past haunt his Seattle houseboat. Demonic machines attack him on the street and in his dreams. Clay becomes a confused, weakened man fighting a losing battle for the very essence of who he is.

Then God’s plan for Clay goes into overdrive. The spiritual battle is on.

He and the one woman who loves him are drawn by events to a small town on the Washington coast where the final showdown between God and the Deceiver will seal Clay’s fate.

From the rain-drenched streets of Seattle, across the dry plains of Texas and back to the wind-swept bluffs of the rugged Washington coast, Clay experiences the hidden destructive power of the Deceiver, and the light of God’s love flowing through those around him. Which force will prevail in the final showdown?

“The Chase”

A Christian Psychological Thriller

(Silver award winner for Christian fiction, 2021)

Never Give Up

What Sheryl remembered most about her life before marrying Clay Austin was the cycle of chaos – brief moments of happiness soon snuffed out by despair – again and again and again.

She thought those days were behind her. She had strong faith, a wonderful husband, and a baby in her womb. So, why were dark thoughts flooding her mind now? Why was she walking to the cliff in the dead of night? Why was a tall, lanky figure intensely studying her from the darkness?

This epic thriller in the Clay Austin series follows the twisting, turning journey of Sheryl Landing as she struggles to rebound from an oppressed childhood in search of herself and love.

Along the way she meets Yawl, a beautiful bird with golden eyes who opens her heart to God. Then one night in prayer she hears a clear voice tell her, “Protect Clay; bring him to me.”

But even as she begins to let the hand of God guide her, an evil power delights in planning her ruin. During her journey Sheryl stumbles, regains her way, falls again, and ultimately, is brought to the brink of destruction.

“The Chase” answers the question: To what length will God go to protect us from evil? And to what extent will the Deceiver go to lure us away from the Light?

Set in modern-day Washington State, “The Chase” draws the reader close to its characters, paints vivid scenes, uplifts with faith, and thrills with suspense.

The novel by Charles Besondy is the fourth title in the Clay Austin Series, best read before or after “The Hidden Saboteur.”

“All for Clay”

A Christian Fiction Novella

When A Mother’s Best Intentions Go Wrong, Will She Be Forgiven?

Elizabeth is a divorced mother whose little boy needs a father. In her quest to find a good man for both of them her decisions shape and scar both of their lives forever.

Elizabeth was raised in a dysfunctional family with an absent father. Now in her late twenties, living in a small Oregon town, she finds herself in the same sad situation as her mother. She vows to do better. She makes a plan.

All for Clay is the story of a mother’s soul-searching dedication and sacrifice for the son she loves more than life itself. But her second marriage goes badly wrong from the start. Can she forgive herself? Will Clay ever forgive her?

All for Clay is the third book in Charles Besondy's Clay Austin Series, headlined by the Christian psychological thriller, *The Hidden Saboteur*. Through the eyes of Elizabeth Austin, readers see the struggles of a mother's life, and they gain insight into the childhood of Clay Austin and the deep wounds that threaten to destroy him as a man.

“Painting for a Stranger,”
A Christian Fiction Short Story

Who Controls Our Life?
Why Do We Meet Who We Meet?

What if someone you had never met was creating a painting that tells your life story, including the future?

The Stories Gallery in Seattle contained such a diverse collection of paintings that visitors didn't believe they were all created by the same artist — Wayne Gee.

Why was the occasional visitor to the gallery or to Gee's booth at a street fair so drawn to one painting or the other they couldn't resist buying it? What power did these paintings possess?

In this short story, Besondy gives us the background of the mysterious painting given to Clay Austin in *The Hidden Saboteur*. But readers not familiar with Besondy's novel will enjoy this thought-provoking allegory.