

In August 1956 a troubled teen-age boy runs away from home, seeking the grand adventures he has only read about. Lying about his age he enlists in the Coast Guard at fourteen. A decade later, his career takes him to Vietnam where he is awarded the Silver Star Medal for gallantry. Returning home, he begins a new career as an undercover narcotics agent. Undergoing torture when his cover is blown, he prays for rescue.

Point Deception

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“A suspense thriller, packed full of criminal activities, military action, and a likeable protagonist with a tortured soul.”

— The Coast Guard Channel

POINT DECEPTION

JIM GILLIAM

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First Edition

ONE

YOU HAVE NEVER LIVED 'til you've almost died. For those who fight for it, life has a flavor the protected will never know.

Deputy Sheriff Dave Holt had been asleep for almost five hours. It was by no means a restful sleep; what there was of it had been a fitful sleep, born of stress, fatigue, and fear for his young partner, Tim Kelly's, life.

The question—always at the forefront of his mind—robbed him of sleep. *Had he encouraged Tim's decision to go undercover, knowing that he was possibly sending him to his death?*

At first Kelly had refused the undercover assignment. His personal code of honor would not allow him to betray a friend; especially one who had saved his life on more than one occasion.

That might have been the end of it, but for subsequent events that sealed his decision to enter the shadow world of drug and human trafficking as an undercover narcotics agent sponsored by his old friend and mentor, Rodolfo Guzman, who was a kingpin in the powerful and ruthless Campeche Cartel.

Rodolfo's restored seventeenth-century Spanish hacienda, located on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, approximately fifteen miles inland from where the river's current collides with the tidal surge of the Gulf of Mexico, was heavily fortified and reputed to be vulnerable only to an attack by an organized military force with air and artillery support.

The proximity of the hacienda to U.S. territory would be the crucial element for Kelly's backup rescue team, which was standing by around the clock to rescue him if he became a prisoner. Or to recover his body in the event he was killed.

Somewhere in the twilight-world between sleep and wakefulness, Holt's conscious mind began to stir. He wondered if he was dreaming.

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What is that annoying buzzing sound? It can't be time to get up. I just got to sleep.

He sat bolt upright in bed, staring in disbelief at the small beeper as it buzzed and vibrated its way across the top of his bedside table. It came to rest against a half-empty bottle of Wild Turkey, his favorite brand of bourbon, taken neat without the muss and fuss of ice or mixers.

The device had been silent for fourteen months. Holt had almost forgotten why he wore the damn thing. That it was buzzing now disturbed him to the point of nausea.

He snatched the noisy device from the nightstand. Silencing the annoying buzzer, he stared in shock and disbelief at the two-word message on the tiny screen:

NO JOY

The universal meaning: “no show,” “not found,” “no luck.” Take your pick.

According to their prearranged plan, Kelly was supposed to contact Holt through a secure telephone at least every five days to pass on any new evidence and at the same time reassure his handler that his cover was still intact.

Allowing for a day of grace, a total of six days without contact would be taken to mean that Kelly's true identity had become known to the cartel and he was either a prisoner within the confines of Rodolfo's hacienda or he was dead.

Neither possibility gave Holt a good feeling.

Picking up the bedside telephone, Holt dialed a number he had committed to memory fourteen months earlier, praying as he did so that his young partner was still alive.

The code number activated a volunteer team of Texas lawmen sworn to carry out a trifold mission that committed them to an illegal, clandestine, armed incursion onto Mexican sovereign territory from which some—possibly all—of them might not return. It was a bold and dangerous plan. Not even the most elite units of the Mexican federal

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police dared attack Rodolfo Guzman's hacienda. It was a renegade state within a state, defying the corrupt Mexican government.

Six days prior to the rescue team's activation, Rodolfo Guzman had angrily confronted Kelly with damning evidence of his deception.

"I would be very interested in your explanation of these photos of you and Deputy Holt of the Cameron County Sheriff's Department," Rodolfo shouted as he attempted unsuccessfully to control his rising anger. He was wildly jabbing his right index finger at several grainy black and white photographs covering the top of his massive oak desk. The photos Rodolfo was so excited about showed Kelly and his soon-to-be stepfather, Dave Holt, having a relaxed lunch at a local Mexican restaurant. There seemed to be no attempt by either of the men to conceal the encounter.

From the beginning, Kelly had realized that his dangerous double life in the violent shadow world of drug trafficking depended not only on guile but also on an essential communication lifeline to the civilized world.

Always a realist, he accepted the fact that the life expectancy of an undercover narcotics agent was often measured in days. He had been under for over fourteen months. This fact made him wary. It forced him to live moment to moment with the gut-wrenching fear that one day his real identity would be discovered. *How much longer can I keep up the charade?* He often asked himself. *I should get out now. That would be the better part of valor.* But that was never going to happen. He was an adrenalin junkie, pure and simple, and like any addict, deep down he craved the high that living on the edge provided. If there was a better thrill, he hadn't heard of it yet.

But the fear, his constant companion, was not for his own life. It was that he would be discovered before he finished his mission. What he cherished more than life itself was his passion to punish the Campeche Cartel or die in the attempt.

"That's simple!" Kelly snapped back, adopting the indignant tone of one who has been falsely accused, and at the same time fearing that Rodolfo would see through his lies. Maintaining eye contact with Rodolfo and striving to keep his voice free of panic, Kelly continued; "Dave and my mother are getting married in a couple of months. So I

took my future stepfather to lunch. What's the big deal? Just because I work for you now, do I have to get rid of all my old friends? Besides, Rucho and I have been sworn enemies since junior high. He's had a strong motive to discredit me since I whipped his ass in front of his gang of schoolyard bullies back then."

"Just try to kick my ass now, *cabron!*" Rucho snarled, moving menacingly toward Kelly.

Rodolfo checked Rucho's advance with a wave of his hand.

Although he lacked the polish and finesse of the fifteenth-century Italian diplomat, Rucho was extremely intelligent and possessed guile and cunning worthy of a twentieth-century Machiavelli.

The façade he allowed those around him to see was really the part he played best. For all intents and purposes, he was just another muscle-bound thug.

However, nothing is ever what it seems, especially in the dark world of drug peddlers and arms smugglers. The last person foolish enough to underestimate Rucho had simply disappeared.

Rucho, who had coveted Rodolfo's piece of the Campeche Cartel for years, was patiently biding his time until he could safely make his move. *Soon! It would be soon,* he promised himself.

Kelly's entry into the Campeche Cartel under Rodolfo's sponsorship fourteen months earlier had begun to play an integral part in Rucho's plans to violently overthrow his boss. Rucho maintained that Rodolfo had grown soft over the years and was no longer hard enough or ruthless enough to survive in the violent world of drug trafficking and arms dealing—*this softness will be Rodolfo's downfall*, he predicted. As Kelly was speaking, Rodolfo appeared pensive, as though he was recalling happier days. Suddenly Rodolfo asked, "Remember the first time we met? I saved your ass when that gang of older boys was preparing to attack you. We became friends that day. Since then, I have treated you as if you were my own son. Have I not? That's why, *mijo*, your betrayal of our friendship and my trust has broken my heart. At first I didn't believe Rucho when he came to me with his what I thought to be trumped up charges of your treachery. I decided to give you a little test. Unfortunately you did not pass. I told you about a drug deal that was so big that you couldn't possibly resist

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passing the information on to your friend, Deputy Holt, if you were truly an undercover narcotics agent. Evidently, you didn't realize that you were the only one I confided in. So please do not continue to desecrate our friendship with your pathetic protestations of innocence."

For the moment, Kelly remained silent, his mouth dry, his heart pounding. It appeared, for the time being at least, that there was no possible escape. Only a quick death might release him from the pain of the torture he knew would come.

As he listened to Rodolfo's angry words, he broke into a cold sweat. A wave of nausea came over him. With great difficulty, he managed to choke back the burning taste of bile coming up from his stomach into his bone-dry throat. It was the feeling of raw fear.

His mind was in turmoil, *I'm dead if I don't get out of here now. How? There's Rodolfo, Rucho, and at least three enforcers between me and the door, and even if I make it through the door, I'm still in the compound. I should have set up an escape plan. Damn it.*

TWO

ALTHOUGH HE HAD no hard evidence, merely a gut feeling born of long-smoldering hatred, Rucho's master plan was to unmask Kelly as an undercover narcotics agent. Whether his suspicions were true or not had absolutely no bearing on his reasons for wanting to expose him as a traitor to the cartel. As Rodolfo had vouched for Kelly when he brought him into the cartel, exposing Kelly would almost certainly guarantee that Rodolfo's permanent termination would be sanctioned by the other cartel bosses. But if Rucho could not prove his allegations with hard evidence, then manufactured evidence would serve as well. Possibly better.

Any objections to the elimination of Rodolfo from the cartel hierarchy would come mainly from the cartel's founder and current boss of bosses, Don Juan Gomez Montenegro. The old Don and Rodolfo had been friends and business associates since the early 1940s. Because the old man had no children of his own, he was very fond of Rodolfo and treated him as though he was his own flesh and blood.

At the same time, the old man's young nephew, Juan Gomez Feliciano, his only male blood relative and heir apparent, was gradually taking over the criminal dynasty with the old man's blessing. Early in his assumption of the reins of control over the cartel, the young don had made his bones by demonstrating that he was ruthless and brutal enough for the task of ruling with an iron fist. By way of example, he tortured and murdered five local independent drug traffickers, incurring his uncle's wrath by foolishly challenging his power.

Like Al Capone, instigator of the 1929 St. Valentines' Day Massacre, Feliciano had intended to ruthlessly demonstrate his absolute power. After the dissenters were brutally tortured and killed, masked gunmen entered a popular Matamoros nightclub owned by the alleged ringleader of the renegade group. After firing automatic weapons into the club's ceiling, the gunmen emptied a burlap sack containing five severed human heads onto the dance floor. This had the desired,

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terrifying effect, and sparked a mass exodus from the club. Many of the club's patrons were injured in the stampede to the doors. Almost as an afterthought, one of the gunmen tossed a sign lettered in blood down among the severed heads: *The cartel doesn't kill for money. It doesn't kill women. It doesn't kill the innocent, only those deserving of death. Know that to defy the cartel is to die!*

Thus it was Feliciano, the rising star in the Campeche Cartel that Rucho sought out as his strongest potential ally in his bid to take over Rodolfo's trafficking operation.

THREE

AS PART OF HIS PLAN, Rucho had bugged Rodolfo's office. He hoped to gather incriminating evidence to support his plan for Rodolfo's fall from grace with the other cartel bosses. Now Rucho listened to a tape of a conversation between Kelly and Rodolfo detailing an upcoming mega drug deal. As Rodolfo's chief enforcer, Rucho would surely have known about this deal if it were real. But it was a mystery to him. The obvious conclusion could only be that Rodolfo was testing Kelly's loyalty.

To ensure that Kelly failed Rodolfo's test, Rucho passed along the false information on the tape to his contact in the U.S. Treasury Department's Bureau of Narcotics, then waited for the inevitable interdiction attempt on the nonexistent shipment. Rucho was delighted with the outcome of his scheme. His investigations of Kelly's true motives for joining the cartel had so far been disappointing.

Rodolfo continued his accusatory tirade, "Now we have the question of what are we to do with you," the old man was saying. "Killing you quickly would be too easy for you and totally unsatisfactory for me. Of course, I must consider the other senior members of the organization. I have lost face with them, and now even my own position has become tenuous, thanks to your treachery. Rucho has assured me that if I give you to him, you will beg for death long before you are blessed by it. But that just won't do. It's too much like the Spanish Inquisition, and this is the twentieth century, after all. However, I understand that the forced addiction to heroin is a hell beyond anything the Spanish Inquisition could have conceived. Some say that it transcends the most horrible of Dante's descriptions of the lowest levels of Hell. In any case, it should be interesting to see just how long it takes your brain to completely short circuit and begin shutting down your vital organs. Your death will be slow and

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agonizing, I would imagine. But then, who knows? You may get lucky and die early in the process.”

EIGHT

THE GLITZ AND GLITTER of Canal Street's strip clubs and the reverie of Bourbon Street in New Orleans' French Quarter were overwhelming to thirteen-year-old Kelly, who up to now had led a relatively sheltered existence in his tiny home town of Port Isabel, with its population of approximately 2,300 souls.

Even the nearby towns of Brownsville and Harlingen—which he'd previously thought to be big in comparison to Port Isabel—could not compare with “The Big Easy;” the indigenous populace's nickname for New Orleans.

Upon his arrival in The Big Easy, he temporarily stored his duffel bag in a locker at the Trailways Bus Depot while he took in a bit of the night life with Corporal Jim Saxton, U.S. Army, whom he met on the bus. He was having the time of his life. His great adventure was finally beginning; he was giddy at the prospect of what he imagined was in store for him.

At around 3:00 a.m., he checked into the YMCA on Saint James Circle, within easy walking distance of Canal Street, New Orleans' main thoroughfare. The rooms were clean and, most important of all, the rent was cheap.

Waking up about seven hours later he took stock of his dwindling finances. His stash of cash had shrunk to around \$110.00. *Not too shabby*, he thought, considering that he had paid for his room at the Y for two weeks in advance.

Corporal Saxton, with his Army reenlistment bonus, had sprung for the drinks during their bar-hopping escapade the previous evening. Later that day, Kelly retrieved his bag from the bus depot and settled into his new temporary digs at the Y. His original plan was to run away and pursue a career at sea in the Merchant Marine.

The problem was that nineteenth-century stories about young fourteen-year-old boys who run away to sea are based on nineteenth-century information provided by authors like Conrad and Melville in novels like *Billy Budd* and *Moby Dick*.

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While his literary hero, Frank Nelson, could just leave home and join the Navy or the Merchant Marine at will in the mid 1800s, a twentieth-century Tim Kelly attempting to do likewise found himself blocked by modern-day bureaucratic certification requirements.

He soon discovered that he couldn't just go down to the harbor, climb aboard a ship, and sign on as he could have done in Melville or Conrad's time. Nowadays, to sail in any capacity you were required to first obtain basic Merchant Mariner Documents, or MMD, from the U.S. Coast Guard.

The catch was that the Coast Guard required a letter of commitment to employ from a shipping company or maritime union before they would issue an MMD. Conversely, shipping companies, as well as maritime unions, required an MMD before they would commit to a job offer.

The International Seaman's Center was located next to the YMCA on Saint James Circle and Kelly began to spend a lot of time there pumping the older mariners for information regarding the process of obtaining a union book as the first step in securing the coveted MMD.

The first thing he discovered was that the initial outlay of money for a union book—not even a full book—was prohibitive, at least for one whose meager funds were being spent on mundane day-to-day necessities like food and lodging.

Even if he had the money to purchase a union book, shipping was so bad in the mid-fifties that the maritime unions were forced to issue a moratorium on accepting new members until further notice.

At first, he found some work as a day laborer. However, that was unreliable. The competition was keen for the few jobs to be had and he didn't get picked to work every day. He thought his luck had changed when he found a job in a mom-and-pop grocery store. The couple was so sorry, but they had to let him go; their niece's boy needed a job. After all, family comes first. They were sure that he understood and they did enclose a twenty-dollar bonus in his last pay envelope.

One of Kelly's mariner friends at the Seaman's Center suggested that he might try the Louisiana Workforce Commission. He got the first

job he applied for, working for the Port of New Orleans. Maintaining the docks was hard, dirty, and dangerous work replacing old pilings that had become structurally unsound.

The port's human resources manager drove him out to the job site and introduced him to the foreman. Tom Maloney was a giant of a man, standing fully six foot six and weighing around three-hundred pounds. His craggy weather-beaten face could have passed for a map of Ireland.

"Tim Kelly, is it? Glad to have another Paddy on the team."

"Glad to be here. I really need this job. Man, do I ever need this job."

The rest of the crew was on coffee break when they approached. Maloney introduced Kelly. "Gather round, boys. This here's Tim Kelly, new man on the job. Make him feel welcome and take it easy on him, for a couple of days, anyway."

"Hi. Jim Sandoval."

"Bill Maxwell."

"Pete Repoff."

"I'm Hank LeBeau, sweet cheeks."

And so the introductions went, with everyone but LeBeau shaking Kelly's hand.

"All right, you guys. Break time's over, back to work. Kelly, you're with me until you get the hang of what we're doing. Just pay attention; you'll be okay."

Over the next few days Kelly settled in and began to feel comfortable on the job. Maloney had offered and Kelly accepted a daily ride to and from work. Shortly after the first week he was assigned to work with LeBeau in an isolated section under Pier Seven. He slid in the mud and bumped into LeBeau, who took the opportunity to grab the cheek of his ass.

"I told you I'd get you, sweet cheeks. I mean to have you, so you best make up your mind to it." LeBeau was so close that Kelly could smell his rancid body odor as well as the acrid odor of stale beer and garlic on his breath. *Doesn't this bastard ever take a bath or brush his teeth?*

Kelly grabbed LeBeau's hand in a control maneuver perfected by the Shanghai Police Department to take down and control prisoners

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foolish enough to resist arrest. Almost impossible to break, the hold, if applied correctly, is exceedingly painful. Thanks to his old friend and teacher Master Hui Li, Kelly was an expert in the application of this particular hold.

“I am not a homosexual, or your boy toy. Grab my ass again and I’ll tear your hand off and cram it up yours.”

Maloney, who had witnessed almost the entire incident, yelled at LeBeau, “Get over and help Repoff and Sandoval; I’ll stay here and help Kelly.” He gave Kelly an appreciative glance. “Looks like you can take care of yourself. Where’d you learn that little trick?”

“Oh, I picked it up from a friend.” Kelly replied, grinning.

“Well done! On another matter, how about coming to dinner tonight? My wife, Mary, would be very happy to meet you. I’ve told her so much about you. Whatever I might have left out of your pedigree, I can promise you, Mary, lovely woman that she is, will pester the bejeezus out of you ’til you fill in all the blanks.”

“That would be great. Thanks. I can’t tell you the last time I had a home-cooked meal.”

It was a Friday afternoon and Kelly’s first full payday.

“Kelly! Me, and some of the guys are going over to O’Toole’s on River Street for happy hour after work. Want to come along?” Maloney invited.

“Okay. Sure. I just have to grab a quick shower. I’m super funky.”

“No worries. We’ll have a cold Guinness waitin’ for ya.”

“Thanks. See you there.”

As he turned off the shower and began to towel himself dry, Kelly looked up to see LeBeau leering at him. He suddenly realized that they were totally alone in the locker room.

“Didn’t I tell you I’d have your tight little ass, one of these days? Well, sweet cheeks, today is the day. I promise to be gentle.” LeBeau purred.

“So this is the obligatory shower rape scene in the bad black and white prison movie?” Kelly quipped.

“No, Chere, this is where you decide to change your life and become my punk.”

LeBeau was more than a little puzzled that the smaller Kelly appeared not in the least intimidated by his lewd proposal; excited by the impending rape, LeBeau ignored the hidden warning.

“LeBeau, you really should rethink this and just leave me alone.”

“Leave you alone? Leave you alone? No chance. I’ll leave you alone when I’m finished with your cute little ass. Just let it happen naturally; you’ll love it, I promise.”

Before Kelly could formulate an answer, LeBeau rushed him. Falling back on his training in Tai Chi, Kelly appeared to melt before LeBeau’s attack. LeBeau—suddenly airborne—was completely surprised; nothing like this had ever happened to him. He landed hard on his back on one of the wooden changing benches; sliding onto the concrete floor and hitting his head, he chipped one of his front teeth.

Kelly swiftly kicked him twice in the groin, “I don’t think that’s the feeling you were hoping for down there, was it?”

Then, Kelly methodically kicked LeBeau several more times, cracking at least four of his ribs. Finally, Kelly placed his bare foot on LeBeau’s throat asking, “Are you getting in touch with your mortality now? I truly hope so, you sick son-of-a-bitchin pervert.”

LeBeau’s eyes reflected a mixture of fear and hatred. Up to this point in his life he had always been the predator. Now he was a victim; it was a terrifying new experience for him.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you now. But if you ever come anywhere near me again, that will be the day you die. Do you understand what I’m telling you, you sick, motherless son-of-a-whore?” Kelly cursed.

“Yes!” LeBeau hissed, trying to catch his breath.

“Good!” Kelly said as he quickly dressed and left the building.

At the main gate to the port, Kelly informed the security guard, “There’s a man down in the shower room in building two-oh-four. I think he must have slipped on a bar of soap or something. I mean, he’s conscious, but he’s bleeding and needs help. You should probably call an ambulance or something.”

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Turning his back to Kelly, the guard placed a call to Charity Hospital, the nearest emergency room with an ambulance service. He gave a brief description of the problem as he understood it to the person on the other end of the line and requested an ambulance. When he hung up the phone and turned around, Kelly had vanished.

NINE

KELLY HURRIED BACK to the YMCA to pack his meager belongings and put distance between himself and his last known address. As a runaway, the last thing he needed was police involvement in an alleged case of assault along with his counter charges of attempted rape and subsequent claims of self-defense. It wouldn't be safe for him to return to work at the port on Monday. There would be too many questions that he couldn't answer, for fear of being exposed.

As it turned out, LeBeau had a prior criminal history of assault and battery, extortion, and attempted rape; he was currently on probation for other related offenses. Kelly had no way of knowing all this, but LeBeau would not be complaining to the police.

Kelly simply faded into the crowded streets of New Orleans, just another nameless, faceless, runaway, lost in the crowd of tourists and assorted hedonistic revelers roaming The Big Easy looking to let the good times roll.

After his hasty departure from the YMCA, Kelly found his way to a no-name, flea bag hotel in the Quarter. The room was cheap and reasonably clean. No one used their real name in a place like this. Chuckling at the irony, he signed the register as Frank Nelson from Mobile, Alabama. *Now that's funny*, he thought—grinning mischievously.

Kelly desperately needed to find a steady job, and quickly. When he could get a day-laborer job, he worked hard to impress the boss, hoping to be asked to stay on the job longer than just for the day. On the days that he was not picked to work, he either walked the streets of New Orleans or spent time reading in the public library. He spent a lot of time in the library during those lean and hungry jobless days.

On one such day he was walking down River Street when he passed Saint Anthony's Mission for Homeless Men. Brother Paul stopped his

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vigorous sweeping of the stoop and looked up; the smile brightening his kindly face was infectious.

Stopping in front of the sweeper, Kelly returned the smile. “Good day, Father.”

“Good day, young man,” Brother Paul replied. “And it’s Brother Paul, not Father.”

“Oh, sorry; you looked like a priest to me.”

“No harm, no foul.”

“So, Brother Paul; what is this place?”

“It’s a mission to provide shelter for homeless men down on their luck until they can get back on their feet.”

“What do you charge?”

“No charge.”

“Could I stay here for a while, ya think?”

“Of course you can. All you have to do is agree to follow the house rules.”

“What might those be?”

“Well we close and lock the outer doors at nine p.m. so you must be in by then. No exceptions! You’re also asked to pitch in with the cleaning and maintenance of the facility. You’re required to take a shower every night before bed, and of course the use of drugs and alcohol is strictly forbidden! We’ll provide you with two meals a day; however, from time to time you may be asked to help with serving and cleanup. You think you could follow these rules?”

“That sounds fair to me. How soon could I move in?”

“Like I said, any time before nine p.m. tonight.”

Kelly moved into the mission later that afternoon. Based out of the mission he continued his search for permanent employment—any kind of work; hunger has a way of eradicating one’s selectivity regarding a job.

He was not having much luck in his search and his cash reserve was disappearing fast. Left with no other viable alternative, he was forced to ask an old and trusted friend for help.

“*Señor* Rodolfo Guzman?” The crisp voice of the international operator asked.

“Yes. This is he.”

“Will you accept a collect call from a Mister Tim Kelly?”

“Yes. Yes. Of course! Put him on.”

“Hello, Rodolfo.”

“Hello *mijo*, how are you? I hope you know that your mother is sick with worry about you. In any case, that is what Mary Beth tells me. For that matter, we’re all worried about you, especially me.”

“I’m sorry to cause anyone any problems, but I’ve just got to see this through. If I’m forced to come home now I’ll have failed.”

Rodolfo, who saw so very much of himself in Kelly sighed heavily, “Okay. I accept that. Can I at least let your poor mother know that you’re all right?”

“I guess so, but please don’t tell her where I am.”

“Okay, I’ll do that much. But you have to promise me that you will check in with me often to let me know that you’re all right. And if you are in any trouble or need anything at all get in touch with me right away. Now tell me how can I help you, *mijo*?”

“Could you loan me two-hundred dollars?”

“Of course, *niño*, that’s no problem. Is that all you need?”

“That will be enough to tide me over until I can find some real work. I really appreciate this, Rodolfo, and I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“No problem, *niño*, don’t worry about it. Where would you like me to send the money?”

“To this Western Union office here in the New Orleans French Quarter.” Kelly gave Rodolfo the address of the Western Union office on Decatur Street a few blocks from Jackson Square. Rodolfo promised to get the money to him right away and, after a few more minutes of casual conversation, broke the connection.

In just over two hours Kelly checked the Western Union office and found that, true to his word, Rodolfo had sent him a money order. Instead of the two hundred requested, Rodolfo had sent him five-hundred dollars.

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Western Union

Telegram

NR132/26SEP1956:2232GMT

TIM

I HOPE YOU FIND WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING
FOR STOP THIS IS NOT A LOAN STOP YOU DON'T
HAVE TO PAY ME BACK STOP TAKE CARE OF
YOURSELF AND BE SAFE STOP
BEST REGARDS RODOLFO

He cashed the money order and left the Western Union office with the five-hundred dollars in his pocket. The amount represented a fortune to him, a new beginning for his adventure.

First, he planned to treat himself to a real meal, not just a Po Boy sandwich or a bowl of red beans and rice that had been his only subsistence for the past couple of weeks; except for Fridays. On Fridays, the Bourbon House offered all-you-can-eat genuine New Orleans Cajun gumbo. This was one of Kelly's favorite feasts for fifty cents—he was even developing a taste for okra, sort of. He still picked out most of the larger, slimier pieces, leaving the remaining pieces to be overpowered by the taste of the chef's secret blend of herbs and spices that had made the Bourbon House's gumbo a culinary legend as far north as New York and as far west as San Francisco.

As Kelly exited the Western Union office, he experienced a sudden chill that had nothing to do with the ambient air temperature. The chill was followed by an involuntary shudder. His grandmother Kelly would've said, "It felt as if someone just stepped on his grave."

More than a little apprehensive, he headed away from the Western Union office in search of a quiet inexpensive place to eat. Try as he might, he couldn't shake off his uneasy feeling. He had never seen five-hundred dollars in a single sum before. Now in possession of that unbelievable amount, he was afraid that someone might rob him. The Quarter is notorious for muggings, rapes, and even murders. Many of these crimes went unsolved. Kelly tried not to dwell on the statistics.

Shrugging his shoulders, he changed his train of thought. *It's probably just that I'm uneasy about carrying so much cash. Five-hundred dollars is an unbelievable amount of money.*

At first it was just a feeling. Then he noticed two barely perceptible shadows on the other side of the dark and narrow street slowly closing and becoming larger. His mouth became dry and his heartbeat and breathing pattern began to quicken. Finally the shadows became two distinguishable figures; the knowledge only heightened his uneasiness. There was no mistaking it; he was being followed.

He thought, *Followed by whom? For what, purpose?* His mouth was already dry and his rapidly beating heart felt like a bird confined within his rib cage—wings beating furiously, trying to escape. Barely successful in his efforts to control the natural instinct to panic, he forced himself to breath slowly and deeply. His brain admonished his body: *calm down, don't panic, look for a way out, prepare for flight or fight*—the normal physiologic response to the perception of danger.

There was no way out of the narrow street. So he had no choice but to prepare to fight—possibly for his very life. The shadows had become clearly visible now as two men.

He crossed the street. Both men crossed over, pausing as if window shopping, each one pointing to items in the window as if attempting to validate the pretense.

He crossed over again, keeping his pursuers in view in the shop window in front of him. He dared not look at the men directly. If he delayed long enough, perhaps someone would come along and foil the impending attack. His thoughts were wildly racing, *you can never find a cop when you need one; maybe running away from home wasn't such a good idea after all.*

His right hand was grasping the hilt of his dagger, which was hidden from view by his jacket. Fearing for his life, he decided that he would stab his closest assailant first. The element of surprise was on his side. With any luck the men wouldn't consider that a lone victim, a young boy—although big for his age—would dare attempt a preemptive strike against the two of them.

He renewed his resolve to strike first with his dagger as soon as they were close enough. He frantically tried to recall the chapter on

POINT DECEPTION

knife fighting he once read in the Marine Corps manual on hand-to-hand combat.

He moistened his dry lips and waited for the attack, *why is my mouth so damned dry?* he thought. His thoughts were a jumble of unrelated bits and pieces of nonsense as he waited for the two men to come closer. *I have to stay calm and center my Chi just as Master Hui taught me. I wish he were here now to help me. I'm way in over my head. I could be killed. I want to go home and finish high school.*

He continued to wait; the hilt of his dagger was wet from the sweat of his right hand that had gone numb from the tightness of his grip. He hadn't noticed. *Oh God, they're almost here. What do I do now?*

The would-be muggers' body language telegraphed their violent intentions as they slowly and confidently approached their lone prey. Having no viable avenue of escape, he waited for the inevitable.

The two shotgun blasts were almost simultaneous! Up close, the noise from the exploding shells was deafening. The walls of the buildings lining the narrow street acted as an echo chamber, amplifying the sound, causing Kelly's ears to ring; it was painful as well as disorienting.

Recovering from the surprise of the blasts, Kelly realized he hadn't seen the shooter. All he saw were the two muzzle flashes reflected in the shop window in front of him.

Both men were down, each in an expanding pool of blood. They looked dead. The look of surprise in their lackluster eyes seemed to confirm that conclusion.

Frozen with fear, Kelly was not able to move so much as one of his fingers, much less flee for his life, and he thought, *I'm next. This is it. I'm going to die now.*

Mesmerized, he watched as the sawed-off pump shotgun retracted out of sight on a spring loaded sling within the folds of the shooter's full-length black leather coat.

In his catatonic trance, Kelly continued to stare as the large, swarthy man in the full-length black leather coat brushed past him, relaying his message in a heavy Cajun accent. "Don Rodolfo sends his regards."

JIM GILLIAM

Kelly stood motionless for a full two minutes; his brain repeating unanswered messages to his body to flee.

He felt a sudden wave of nausea. He had not eaten since yesterday. With some difficulty he managed to choke back the burning, bitter taste of bile suddenly refluxing from his stomach into his dry throat. Finally, he started to run away; windows and doors facing the street were opening, the morbidly curious were starting to stir, as though somehow sensing that any possible danger to them had passed, signaling that it was safe now to investigate.

The first scavenger arrived on the grisly scene and quickly turned out the pockets of the two corpses—plundering them for any valuables, to be hocked later when the pawn shops opened for business.

In August 1956 a troubled teen-age boy runs away from home, seeking the grand adventures he has only read about. Lying about his age he enlists in the Coast Guard at fourteen. A decade later, his career takes him to Vietnam where he is awarded the Silver Star Medal for gallantry. Returning home, he begins a new career as an undercover narcotics agent. Undergoing torture when his cover is blown, he prays for rescue.

Point Deception

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