

A motivational speaker combines forces with a former counterintelligence agent.

Deadly Exchange: A Novel

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Deadly Exchange

A Novel

By

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used ficticiously.

Author's Note:

While this is a work of fiction, the technology described is real. I have taken the liberty to enhance its capabilities. Please see the technology section at the back of the book.

Cover design by Melissa Gilbert
Author photo by David Hartig

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PART ONE

“Many things can be proven that are not true.”

— *Anonymous* —

One

Suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, 4:01 A.M.

Near a forest green telephone relay box on a narrow side street shrouded in the darkness of a moonless night, three figures wearing caps and clad in black stepped from the side doorway of a gray van. The idling engine offered a low rumble in the early morning silence.

The team leader, the only one knowledgeable about the operation, opened the box with a key. He hooked an object the size of a pen cap onto the main line that dispersed phone service to the surrounding oversize single-family homes. The other two men maintained strict vigilance from the shadows.

“Damn,” the leader whispered into a miniature microphone clipped to his shirt collar. “The wire coding’s different than our schematic. Get me updated info and quick.”

A deep voice came through his earpiece, “Sorry, forgot to update the codes.”

“Yeah, nation’s capital—security. Just hurry!” The man at the box tapped his fingers in the seconds that passed like hours.

“It’s blue to green, pink to yellow, and red to black.”

In minutes the man’s practiced fingers completed the last of five hundred installations. The device’s intended function began immediately, receiving signal by satellite.

All three men returned to the van. The leader checked his watch. Total stationary time: ten minutes, twenty-five seconds, an acceptable performance despite the delay.

* * *

Hotel Room, San Diego, California

Tuesday, 7:55 A.M.

Hand trembling, Jennifer Chance hung up the phone—the reminder call from Charles, her assistant.

Time to go.

Wanting to check her look one last time, she hesitated, afraid of what the mirror may reflect back. Just before the call it had happened again, the other image. As usual, the double take revealed nothing. That other face came only with glimpses. The kind one gets of things too transient to behold, like a familiar visage on a stranger’s body.

Standing before the door that led out into the suite, the vanity mirror just off to the right, she took a deep breath. She’d just have to trust that she looked the part for the performance, the job, and the company.

With manicured fingers, nails the color of pink roses, she stroked the nickel-sized gold circle pendant, tracing the raven etched into the translucent material. It was a gift from her boss, the Director of Lectures And More, Inc, upon completion of eighteen months training for

presenters. That was three years ago. Since then, she had risen to the top of the motivational speaker circuit.

All of a sudden the room began to sway. She clutched at the door's edge, simultaneously fighting the nausea that swam in her belly. The thought of calling Charles and canceling the keynote address enticed like a siren song.

Breathe, she coached herself.

After several deep breaths, she gathered strength despite the deep exhaustion that had clung to her like a heavy overcoat since early spring. If she could only slow down for a few days and rest a bit. Winking at the mirror, she grabbed a small purse and left the room.

Bypassing the elevators she descended the nine flights of white-walled stairs, her two-inch heels barely whispering a sound. Exiting at the lobby level, she saw Charles, dressed in the perennial blue jacket and tan slacks, tapping a foot and watching the elevator lights.

"Boo!" she said, poking him in the ribs from behind. He jumped at least a foot, boyish face flushing a few shades lighter than a beet.

"Pleased with yourself?" he asked, watching her double over in laughter. "Another trip to the hairdresser after that convulsion."

Erect again, with hair restored to primed perfection, she smiled with sweet confidence. "How many times have I used the elevator in the last three years that we've been on the road together?"

"Uh, I don't know. Why do you take the stairs?"

"It feels good. Stimulates the senses. Come on." Placing a hand just above the elbow she guided him to the hotel restaurant. "See the goal is to descend as fast as you can, but without making any noise. I don't remember where I learned that, but you should try it."

"The exerciser, I'm not." He eased his plump five-foot eight-inch frame into a booth that overlooked the sparkling San Diego Bay. Straightening a red necktie with faint blue specks that matched his jacket, he said, "Now listen, here's the itinerary, we..."

Jennifer tried to appear attentive while gazing out the long, tall windows at boats in the harbor locked by their moorings. Her thoughts drifted, trying to recall the fleeting image from the mirror. Is something wrong with me? Maybe I should see a doctor? But I see the company doctor every three months. Jolted back to reality by her assistant's insistent voice, she gave him an apologetic look.

"Yeah, sure Charles, Washington, D.C. and..." Putting a hand up, she stifled a yawn.

He droned on about the impending travel schedule, pausing only to check his look in a thin strip of smoky reflective glass that decorated all four sides of a post, which rose to the sixteen-foot ceiling.

Without any of the usual politeness, she suddenly interrupted him. "Charles, have you ever looked in the mirror and seen...?" She stopped as the waitress approached, holding a coffee carafe.

“Go on, you’ve got my interest now. Besides, we’re like ... like...” He tapped a chubby finger to his lip, searching for a word that she would accept and further endear him to her. “Close. We’re close, so you can tell me anything.”

“Well, I haven’t said anything lately, but for the last four months or so, something hasn’t felt right ... inside. It’s as if there’s.... No, it sounds too crazy.” She paused. “It all seemed to start when I read the line in that book.”

“You mean that joke book?”

”Not that one. In the English translation the book is titled, *The Immoralist*. Anyway, I’m confused. I’m not even sure who I am anymore. Maybe a break from LAM and the speaker’s circuit would be good.”

She didn’t notice the sudden whitening of Charles’s knuckles around the coffee cup. He took a steady sip, ears at full alert.

“How can you say that? You’re Jennifer Chance, big headliner for Lectures And More. And ... and look at all they’ve done for you—the clothes, the parties, the fame, the success.”

“Yes, the success. What is success, really? To wear yourself out for the purposes of another?”

“I can’t believe you!” Charles glanced at his designer watch. “That’s ... we’d better go.”

He got up, smoothing his tie and flashing a weak smile.

“Don’t be angry. I know LAM gives me security and stability. And the programs we offer are worthwhile.”

In the pastel-colored hallway, music reverberated beneath their feet as they neared the two-thousand capacity conference hall. Through the doors Jennifer observed the usual laser lights dancing around the crowd.

“Your fans await,” said Charles, fixed smile still in place. “By the way, that dress fits you like a pampered hand in a satin glove. It really matches your—hey, you’re not wearing the colored contacts.”

She put a finger to her lips then eyed the outfit, smoothing a wrinkle from the midnight blue dress that shimmered with her every movement. All perfectly tailored to sell the product: Jennifer Chance. She glanced at the large Lectures And More welcome banner that spanned the doors. It listed her name followed by T. Harv Eker, Zig Ziglar, and Samuel Caravell. Through a forced smile, she said, “Time to talk about the keys to unlock one’s deep potentials through one’s beliefs.”

Trying to cover agitation about the conversation over coffee, Charles rubbed her shoulder as he spoke. “Show time, super sparker, knock ’em dead.”

With a nod she entered the nearby prep room. She took the mini-microphone from the waiting sound engineer. Clearing her mind, she settled into the role of master motivational speaker, at once exuding calmness and confidence. She winked at Charles, and turned toward the soundman.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Charles cast a furtive glance in her direction, then take a cell phone from his inside jacket pocket. He pressed a speed dial key on the phone and adjusted his tie again with the other hand. Just about to speak he shut the door to the green room.

Jennifer turned her head and stared at the light brown door, wondering, while the engineer completed the sound check.

* * *

Near Coit Tower, San Francisco, California
Wednesday, 5:15 A.M.

In the bedroom of his seventh floor condo, Frank Revere fought the sweat-soaked top sheet of the queen size futon atop a solid wooden frame. The light blue sheet entwined his right leg as a nightmare played out:

...a not-so-distant screech of tires on asphalt pierced the permeating silence of early morning. He swung an arm around a blonde-haired girl in her middle twenties as they leisurely jaywalked across Powell Street just north of Sutter, a stone's throw from Union Square. Another spontaneous Sunday. She pulled his head closer and kissed a stubbly cheek. Halfway across the street, he looked at her—the most tender woman he had ever known. Joy abounded, warmth flowing between them.

All of a sudden, his companion tensed as the screech of tires came once more. A black Buick with tinted windows careened around the corner of Pine and Powell, just missing a woman with a twin baby carriage. The car barreled down upon them. Despite instincts and reflexes honed from intense government training, he couldn't get her out of the way. The sun's brightness became obscured. He flew skyward. Slow motion, the sign for the Double Rainbow Cafe turning upside down.

Maybe the car had missed her ... if only.

Relaxed, he rolled off the hood of a new red sports car—broken windshield. He smacked the concrete with a resounding thud.

Then it hit—pain, sucking all the oxygen from his body. It emanated from somewhere below his right hip and more severe than anything he could have ever imagined. But the pain told him he was still alive.

Sarah! Sarah! Oh Sarah! He screamed, but no sound escaped as a deep, dark, cylindrical hole closed in....

Awakened in an instant, Frank sat bolt upright in bed, heart like a trip-hammer, breathing rapid and shallow. He shook his head, trying to rid it of haunting images not seen in six months. On the wall opposite the bed, faint illumination from the city lights filtered through the heavy dark blue window shade.

He ran a hand through damp hair and pressed a fist into the muscles of a reconstructed right leg. This was not an ordinary nightmare that one simply forgets, or that one puts aside with sips of water and then returns to sleep. The ache in his hip reminded him it wasn't a dream at all. It had really happened.

He switched on the light atop the heavy oak night stand next to the bed and looked at the smooth, though raised, quarter-inch wide line of skin that started just below the right hip bone and ran eight inches down his thigh. Tracing the sickle shaped scar, images of the incident that matched the nightmare flooded his memory.

With a deep breath, he picked up a small-framed photograph, which showed a handsome couple. The woman's blond hair fell about her shoulders in soft curls and a natural complexion surrounded captivating blue eyes that accented her high cheekbones. Her smile, inviting, radiated warmth and charm.

A shiver ran through his body whenever he looked at her lips, such deep sensuality. Their slight bell-shape still moved him even from a photograph. He gazed at the other figure in the picture: a young man of twenty-eight with windblown, dark brown hair, piercing eyes, and tanned face. A wry smile turned up on the right side. He always recognized the woman and the accompanying ache of emptiness in his chest. But the man—the man—a figure he would have liked to say he didn't know. Yet that would have been a lie.

He regarded the empty space next to him on the bed. She was gone. Despite years of clandestine field operations and counterintelligence, he hadn't been able to avoid a simple moving vehicle, even when the most cherished aspect of his life was at stake. For years, the weight of remorse had hung on him with the force of a ship's anchor. He could feel the tug.

"All right!" he said to himself. "Get grounded again. Center, like Sensei says. Self-criticism won't help anybody."

After a few minutes of *prana* breathing, and a gulp of water, new clarity arose. For the first time in years, he knew what must be done. He slipped on some jeans and a blue sweatshirt that read 'Cherish the Wild' in red letters. Down the short hallway to the second bedroom, the unused bedroom, he paused. It had been shut for the better part of five years.

Now, the doorknob beckoned him.

He took a decisive deep breath and entered the tidy eight-by-ten-foot office. An old wooden roll-top desk, part of Sarah's family heritage, sat off to one side. He hadn't had the heart to throw it away, along with the rest of her belongings. The timing hadn't been right.

He surveyed the room. An outdated calendar still hung on the wall with markings made by her to keep track of yearly travel plans for her business. He smiled at the framed poster that read: 'In order to know others, one must know oneself. In order to know oneself, one must know others'.

Such was Sarah's profoundness. He believed her irreplaceable, so he had stopped trying, and stopped living.

He looked at the closed doors of the bedroom closet. He knew her scent-filled clothes that hung there by heart. After the hit and run, he had spent the first five months in recuperation. The next two, after quitting the government, he searched for a trace of her whereabouts—hospital stay, surgeon's records, anything. He never saw her body, the body of the woman he loved. At nine months, in resignation, he had moved the clothes.

His right hip began to ache again. It signaled time for movement. He kneaded the area a bit, knowing enough was enough.

Rummaging through the desk drawers, intending to pack things up, he found a set of gold plated pens, a folder. Each item triggered memories—a lawyer placing a brass urn into his hands. The urn—hard, bronze, metallic, devoid of breath and life—had replaced the vibrant, living silk-and-honey skin that surrounded the beautiful essence of Sarah.

He laid her last will and testament on the desk, muttering. “Flesh to ash, papers to money.”

He pulled out a small, black velvet-covered box and stopped. More fragments started to come: his cane, a limp, and the dark-suited man calling to him with outstretched hand holding a key.

“The key!” he exclaimed aloud.

He opened the box and a small, silvery metal key lay atop more velvet, right where he’d left it, almost five years ago. He had thought Sarah had shared everything with him—desires, pains, passions—but not the safe deposit box.

Grabbing the key he checked his black, steel, diving watch. Too early for the bank. He pocketed it and limped into the kitchen, the leg always stiffer in the morning.

Half an hour later, steaming black tea in hand, he stared at a black kevlar-lined briefcase on the coffee table. Opening the case he hefted the Browning .45 caliber automatic—perfect fit, as always. Next, he inspected a set of perfectly balanced throwing knives, then some of the more arcane weapons collected during those counterintelligence years with the National Security Agency: a thin piece of wire with sturdy rubber handles, a ball-point pen that housed no ink, only three inches of surgical-grade steel.

Images resurrected in his mind, moving limbs flickering under the cover of darkness. Too many nights, too much danger, too many deaths.

He shut the case and locked it.

Shouldering a black nylon backpack, he grabbed the bulletproof weapons-case and left the apartment. Filled with resolve, he strode toward the Aikido dojo eight blocks away, trying to catch Sensei before the first morning class.

As Frank entered the three-story brownstone, he bowed and slipped off his shoes. An older gentleman, whose nimbleness and fluidity belied his age, approached with a modest smile and eyed the black case.

“Konichi wa, Frank san. What brings you for visit so early?”

Frank bowed to his master, explaining that he had a favor to ask. He followed the older man to a back office, the formal *gi* swishing about his legs. As always, to his eye, the man seemed to glide, rather than walk.

“We talk here, no one ‘round.”

“I wish to entrust you with this case, Sensei. The contents are very dangerous, as you know my history.” Frank bowed and put the case on the desk.

“Hai, wise choice. Water way of harmony better than weapons of survival.” Sensei took the case with a bow and disappeared behind a shoji screen. He returned, led Frank to the mat, placing a long hard wooden staff, a *jo*, in his hands. “Words not enough.”

Immediately, the master attacked with a hard wooden samurai sword, a *bokken*. The two commenced fighting over the entire area of the mat, each strike matched by an appropriate countermeasure. The air soon filled with clicks from heavy wood on wood, and swooshes from weapons moving at blinding speed through empty space.

Then, sensing an opening, Frank struck hard at his teacher who held the ground until the last second when he surrendered his stance. With inches to spare, Sensei glided out of the way of the attack and grabbed the handle of Frank's weapon as it sliced the air in front of his face. With a flick of his wrist, Sensei flipped his student into the air. Frank landed with a resounding slap, lessening the impact with a practiced break-fall.

In a flash, Sensei placed the sword tip into Frank's right shoulder socket, pinning him.

"You have progressed much in last four years, but true strength of vulnerability surpasses aggression. It is eternal."

After the impromptu lesson, and moving with much more ease, Frank ambled over to the Bank of America at Union Square. Within minutes what had remained hidden for five years came to light—the location of Sarah's safe deposit box. Now it was a matter of opening it. That would require a visit to San Diego—old stomping ground.

Back in his top floor condo, Frank made the appropriate arrangements with the office and had his secretary order a ticket for the next morning.

He stood in front of the living room bay window as mid-morning sun flooded in, though mist still shrouded the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance. He tapped the pocket of his jeans, the one that held the key. Regardless of outcome, the key in the lock of that bank box offered a certain degree of finality to the mystery of his former life.

Two

ENOCH Corporation HQ, Reston, Virginia
Thursday, 12:15 P.M.

In a suburb outside Washington, D.C., on a dead-end street, inside a red brick three-story office building situated amidst a gathering of dogwood and maple trees, a meeting progressed.

Peter Wellington, disguised in a wig of black hair and matching mustache that made him look ten years younger, glanced around the second story plush auditorium. It was filled with a group of distinguished international visitors as well as Fortune 500 entrepreneurs, invitation only.

He returned to the booklet that each attendee had received for today's demonstration, and read:

*ENOCH CORPORATION:
Bio-Energetic Tensiometer
By
W. J. Jones, Ph.D.*

History

Various governments have been exploring the effects of different electronic frequencies on the human being since Nikola Tesla discovered a method to control Electromagnetic Force Fields (EMFF) in the early twentieth century. Today, numerous radio frequencies are commonly employed by governments and businesses for location and tracking of objects, including humans.

This is achieved by miniature computer chips attached with tiny antennae, called radio frequency identification devices (RFID) and 'smart' or radio tags, which broadcast their data wirelessly to anyone with an RFID reader (see diagram). There are two types of RFID: active and passive. Passive systems are the most prevalent, employing three types of frequencies: ultra high (300MHz to 3GHz), high (10-15MHz), and low (125-500kHz).

However, there is a secret category of frequency, called ultra low, that we will see demonstrated today. Briefly, through years of research, as part of the US government's psychogenic warfare program begun in the 1970's, a specific frequency, 121.7 kilohertz, was identified as able to penetrate the human subconscious.

A secret group within the U.S. government operated out of Long Island's Montauk Air Force Base for ten years after that base officially closed in the 1980's. During this time-period, it became referred to as Sensory Destabilization and Deactivation (SDD) technology. Designed and perfected for military warfare, it was demonstrated in the Gulf War, Afghanistan, and other global hotspots in need of quick domination. The towers erected on the borders of the United States also utilize this tracking technology. Soon....

Peter looked up as a large, well-dressed woman sat down next to him. She nodded. He touched the fake mustache lining his upper lip and smiled, then returned to the report.

The Birth of the Bio-Energetic Tensiometer (BET)

In the eighties, in preparation for the space station, NASA conducted in-depth studies to explore the effect of inactivity on the human body in terms of basal metabolic rate, blood flow, and sensory-motor abilities, such as fine motor acuity, postural sensory signals, among others. The studies showed dramatic changes in a person's sensory and motor functions as well as central nervous system function in the absence of purposeful physical activity. The research concluded that a decrease in the central nervous system causes a decrease of functioning in virtually all systems of the body, including the immune system, organs, and autonomic nervous system.

Over the last five years the Research and Development Division of ENOCH Corporation have improved the SDD technology. Previously, the frequency passed through the brain and the desired behavior of the subject was created with subliminal neuro-messages. Based on the NASA studies, we chose to create the loss of homeostasis in the subjects by destabilizing the center of gravity within each individual. This produces a more subtle degeneration of the person's proprioceptive abilities inherent within the body. Through such means....

Peter put the booklet down as the lights dimmed in the auditorium and others illuminated a stage. He adjusted his fake silver-rimmed glasses, and looked at the stage, which consisted of a platform divided in half by a solid wall. On each side of the stage stood a man and a woman behind podiums, each with a cordless phone. A couple of feet above each podium hung a boom microphone. Two camera operators prepared to film the event.

A man of average height in a gray suit with slicked back jet-black hair and hawk-like features directed crewmembers from the left side of the stage, clipboard in hand. He stroked his closely trimmed goatee-mustache and beckoned to a young man, who instantly scurried off through thick black curtains backstage.

The couple nearest the man-in-charge stood with submissive smiles plastered on their faces. The man, in his early forties, looked as if he could lift an ox. He dwarfed the man with the clipboard. In her late thirties, the woman, a head shorter, adjusted her dirty blond hair.

Something about the way that the man in the gray suit moved struck Peter as odd, but he couldn't get a handle on it. He watched the man skirt the wall downstage and greet the second couple. He shook the hand of a lanky man wearing a pair of old style plastic-framed glasses, held in place by an aquiline nose. Next to him stood a woman with mousy brown hair. She hid some of her girth beneath a long, loose, pink dress.

The man with the clipboard left the stage after cueing both camerapersons. Within seconds, he appeared as if by magic in the rear of the auditorium much to the surprise of the audience, except Peter, who had noticed an almost seamless doorway off to the right.

The man strode to the front of the theater seats and spoke in a warm, though crisp, voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Dr. Walter Jones. On behalf of ENOCH, I welcome you to our research facility and our demonstration of the Bio-Energetic Tensiometer device, a refined version of the Sensory Destabilization and Deactivation technology developed by the US government. Our advancements allow us to operate through simple landlines as well as satellite linkages for cellular communication. As stated in the handout we have even put the device into microchip form. Note the plastic glasses worn by the man on set 'B' and the pendant on the woman next to him."

Peter removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Today,” continued Jones, “we are going to show you the device’s ability to destabilize a person’s sensory-motor system by the simple application of an electromagnetic frequency amplified through the phone line. Our gracious guests have volunteered to be subjects. We have selected two couples who have been happily married for ten years or more and intentionally split them up to illustrate the effect our device can have on physical and emotional stability, among other things.” He surveyed those in attendance with a congenial smile, and placed hands on hips as he went on. “In the last forty-eight hours, each volunteer has been exposed to continual stimulus from a Bio-Energetic Tensiometer microchip worn on their person. We call it the BET for short. I’m certain the information packet you received answered most of your questions. Now, let’s meet the participants. On set ‘A,’ Phil Dibbs and Gail Bland. On set ‘B,’ we have Eileen Dibbs and Jerry Bland. Let’s give them a big hand as we turn on the microphones and roll cameras.”

* * *

Seaport Village, San Diego, California
Thursday, 9:45 A.M.

At an outside table of an adobe-styled coffeehouse Jennifer basked in brilliant rays from the sun, trying to relax. Seagulls screeched and swooped overhead as she contemplated the tranquil bay water before her, feeling relieved to be done with her conference obligations. Only one glitch remained: Charles. He hovered a few feet from the table, like a mongrel dog waiting for scraps from its master.

She jotted some notes into the Blackberry provided by LAM, Inc. Well-trained to solidify all goals in writing, she wrote:

- >Break from LAM —an issue of sanity maintenance.
- >Go to the top! See Director. Submit sabbatical request.

After finalizing the entry she turned the device off with a resounding tap.

“Oh Jennifer,” said Charles. “I hate to bother you but what’s the plan for the rest of the day? I know we spoke of a bit of a break for you before we fly to D.C. on Tuesday. But Channel 10 called and wants to do a segment on you, pronto. Of course, the head office is all for it. Whaddya say?”

“Nope, sorry, no can do. I made a promise to *myself* and I’m sticking to it, for once.”

“Well, I... What about your contract with LAM?”

Slightly amused, she watched his pacing increase.

He flashed a quick glance at her neck. The raven pendant still hung in place. “You can’t ignore your duties to the organization like some rebellious teenager. Yesterday, I almost called the head office to ... to....”

“To what Charles? To tell them that I feel overworked, that I need a break from LAM, from this life?”

“May I remind you, we have protocols in this organization. Try to run a business without protocols and you will not be in business very long. LAM has been like a family to you and this is how you treat them. What is wrong with you anyway? You seem so different, so scattered.”

Jennifer realized an outwardly aggressive posture wouldn't produce the desired result: to be left alone. She was about to feign fatigue when notes of the latest pop single filled the air.

Charles flipped open his cellular phone and answered with proper etiquette. Listening for a moment, a grin crossed his face before he spoke.

“Yes sir, she turned her phone off.” Another pause. “Why of course, sir.”

With one hand on a hip, teeth glinting in the sunshine, he handed the phone to Jennifer. “It's for you—the Director.”

Taking the phone, she turned away. “Hello Ulrich, so nice to hear from you. I hope all's well. How's the weather?”

“The usual for here,” said a deep baritone voice, which usually soothed her, but not today. “You know the islands. But I didn't call to chat about cloud formations in our respective locations. How do you feel about the convention?”

“I think my two sessions went really well. Now, you didn't take time out of your busy schedule just to check on li'l ol' me, did you?”

“Actually I did. We've known each other a long time, through thick and thin, and I'm a bit concerned. I caught some of your presentation coverage on the television yesterday and you appeared a bit strained. Everything okay?”

“Funny you should ask, I was just saying to Charles that I feel a bit drained. To be honest, I need a few days to recharge my batteries. I would greatly appreciate some peace and quiet—alone. I mean, if that's all right with you, sir?”

“I don't think that would be uncalled for. You've been on the road for a number of months straight.”

“Too true. Thank you for understanding. I've tried to hint to Charles to give me a breather for a few days so I can enjoy the wonderful sun, surf, and sand. I just need some time to rest.” She looked hard at Charles, who had edged closer, appearing to look at a nearby plant. “Would you mind giving my dear assistant orders to occupy himself for a few days. I don't want any contact from him, the office, or even you, sir. If that's not too much to ask.”

She held her breath through what seemed an interminable silence, unconsciously biting a cuticle as a knot developed in the upper part of her stomach. She tried to think pleasant thoughts—sunbathing, relaxing, and just being alone—all of which brought a smile.

“Why not. I think we can do without contact from the motivational world's top performer for a few days. Have some fun. Take in the sights. I'll see you in Washington next week. Get some rest. Before I speak with Charles, I heard about an opportunity for an exclusive on a local station there. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“If you don't mind, arrange to do it before you leave San Diego. Publicity is all important, as you know.”

“Uh ... all right, sir.” Jennifer felt her stomach constrict as she handed the phone over.

Charles moved away from her, head bobbing as he listened further. He glanced back over his shoulder at her. She pretended not to listen.

“Yes, sir. Just one thing though, she’s been acting a bit strange. I don’t know how to put it. She’s been like ... uh ... a rebellious....”

Jennifer saw that Charles had stopped pacing. He was listening intently. Then, his head performed another series of bobs before he pocketed the phone, and walked back to where she sat.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I shoulda realized you were so frazzled. I’ve been so caught up in the success you’ve generated, especially in the past year. I’ll arrange the spot with Channel 10 and let you know. Tell you what, I’ll also arrange a car for the next couple of days to give you a bit more mobility and less visibility than with the limo and ... and what else can I do?”

“Try: anything not in my presence.”

She almost spat the words at him, disgusted with herself and at his kissing up to the Director. Wanting to be rid of him, she glanced toward the cafe entrance and noticed an attractive dark-haired man with a strong jaw-line seated at a nearby table. He was about to bite into a muffin. Something about him drew her attention, yet she felt cautious.

“Jenneeey, please.”

“If you could leave me now so I can be alone and enjoy this beautiful day. The hotel is close, so I can walk or grab a cab.” Feigning exhaustion, she went on. “Charles, you’ve been such a dear, just have the rental car left at the hotel.”

Sensing agreement with his offer, he got up to go.

“Oh Charley, other than the Channel 10 thing, no contact for a day or two?”

He hesitated, then gave his best smile accompanied by a thumbs up sign.

“Thanks so much, you’re so good to me. See ya!”

She gave a little wave and watched to make sure he had left the area. As soon as he was out of sight, she flung her arms into the air, and headed to the coffeehouse entrance. She walked past the man she had observed. Aware that eyes of other male patrons followed her, she wondered if his had, too.

After several minutes, she re-emerged with a latte in hand. She slowed passing the man’s table and flashed a warm, winning smile as he looked up.

Their eyes met. She stopped, noticing that his hazel eyes didn’t stray from hers.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

The man didn’t respond, or even smile right away. Then, in a voice suitable for radio, he said, “Uh, yeah, really nice. I admired the way you handled the uptight, pretty boy, promoter-type guy.”

“Mhmm. My associate has a tendency to be a bit clingy, like a young child with its mother or something.”

“I see. Excuse me, I’m Frank, nice to meet you.”

Warmth radiated through her palm as they shook hands.

“Jennifer. Jennifer Chance, pleasure to see you, too.”

“You’re Jennifer Chance. Of course. That explains it.”

“Explains what? Have we met before? Forgive me, I’m usually really good with names, but Frank doesn’t give me much to go on.”

“Across the distance, I sort of felt that I knew you and couldn’t figure it out as I didn’t recognize you. Usually I’m very good at faces, an old habit. I must have seen your work in a catalog: Nightingale Conant, right? You do seminars on ‘Following Your Dreams’ or something?”

“Actually it’s called, ‘Your Beliefs and You’, part of Lectures And More’s education platform.” She relaxed and smiled again. “Oh, that is funny. You gave me a bit of a shock there.”

“Really, I would’ve thought you’d be used to such one-way recognitions.”

“I’m a bit out of it today. From across the courtyard you seemed familiar to me, too. I thought we’d met somewhere before.”

“Are you here on business or vacation?”

“Honestly,” she glanced at her watch. “Business finished about a second after my associate left. I’ve needed a break, so the next couple of days are mine. A vacation of sorts, a time to check in with me, if I can. Like Zig Ziglar says, ‘A check up from the neck up.’”

“Maybe I can help.” He closed one eye and inspected her head. “Everything seems in order from the outside. You sparkle like a diamond.”

“Thank you, but you needn’t be bothered with this. I ... I better....”

“No, really, it’s fine.” He paused. “Hey look, I have to do an errand, but ... uh ... would you like to spend some time together, maybe a lunch or dinner?”

All of a sudden, an image of a person flying through the air flashed through her mind. Jennifer blinked and it was gone.

“Frank, I’d love to take you up on that for tomorrow or the next day.”

“Great! I’m just staying at a small B and B up the coast. But here’s my cell number.”

She took his card, barely glancing at it. She set her drink on his table and scribbled on a napkin. “Here’s mine. Call me mid-morning. We’ll be spontaneous.”

“Maybe rent some bikes and cycle along the coast or something”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Until tomorrow.”

“I look forward to your call.”

Jennifer walked a few steps and looked back. She gave a little wave as Frank nodded. After a few more paces, unable to resist, she glanced over her shoulder again. The table was vacant.

Three

Shopping Center, San Diego, California
Thursday, 10:45 A.M.

At the north end of a shopping center in a region known as North County Inland, Rafael Mendoza crossed the crowded parking lot. He spotted a wiry-framed, swarthy-complexioned man with unruly, curly, black hair, who appeared to be engrossed in the USA Today while enjoying a cappuccino.

In reality, the man, Pierre Logon, was one of Mendoza's team of four operatives. Trained as a behind-the-lines infiltration specialist by the Foreign Legion, he had spent the last five weeks doing in-depth recon in the area, mingling with local denizens and observing movements of private security personnel and local police.

Mendoza, a former Special Forces soldier, scratched the left shoulder of his tan blazer—the standard 'go' signal for the operation. Pierre slipped on a pair of skin-toned latex gloves and began to move toward the target location.

Passing a red and white Brink's armored security truck stationed in front of the large grocery store, the two men, seemingly independent of each other, entered the bustling atmosphere of the store. With the precision of a Swiss watch, each went to pre-determined posts.

A third man, Carlos Barrera, dressed in a blue track suit and sporting a single ponytail to shoulder blade level, caught Mendoza's signal and maneuvered a full shopping cart to the pre-set location. Beneath the groceries lay a small caliber sniper's pistol fitted with a special adapter, which allowed the weapon to be fired without actually being held.

Pierre sauntered down the aisle toward the cart. Without a word, Carlos spun around and exited the aisle from the far end.

Hidden by his palm, Pierre looked through a miniature scope, noting the Brink's badge on the guard's uniform and a holstered 9mm Glock. The muscular Filipino guard stood with hands on hips and surveyed the shoppers through dark sunglasses, an odd habit duly noted by the team. Pierre situated the shopping cart in Aisle 12 to perfectly align with the guard's position.

Close to the checkout counters, basket in hand, Carlos now sauntered past the guard, to the left of an ATM machine. Appearing to inspect various items on a shelf at the front of the store, he blocked access to and from the stairs that led up to in-store bank offices.

Off to the right of the ATM machine Mendoza pretended to wait, though checking the guard, who stood twenty feet from the Brinks transfer person, backs to each other. Next, off to the left, he scrutinized all bank personnel as they handled a small queue of customers. At last, the unarmed transfer person kneeled before the open machine. The routine was the same every week. Any excess moneys were loaded into the waiting Brinks vehicle.

Everything was set.

Carlos closed in on the transfer person and in an exaggerated Mexican accent asked, "Scuse me, ma'am. Ya knowa how much dis bag of food cost?"

"I'm sorry sir, I don't work for the grocery store," replied the woman. Ever so slightly, her heavysset frame shifted away from the center of the machine as if drawn in by the question.

Simultaneously, on her opposite side, keeping his back to the bank cameras, Mendoza produced a lightweight, folded, black carry bag from underneath his blazer. With it close to his body, it remained unseen by others.

“Lo siento, por favor senora. I coun’na ‘ear you.”

Carlos dropped to one knee and plunged a miniature graphite stiletto between the woman’s ninth and tenth ribs with the precision of a skilled surgeon. Instantaneous death. He put an arm around the woman, giving the outward appearance of support. Not a sound escaped her lips. A mere pinprick of blood served as the only evidence of foul play.

In perfect synchronization with Carlos’s disposal of the woman, the bullet from Pierre’s silenced pistol ploughed into the chest of the security guard, expanding upon impact within the body. The man crumpled to the floor. No exit wound. A small patch of blood flowered on his shirtfront.

At precisely the same time as the second target fell, Mendoza dropped down, the bag expanding in descent. He scooped the money into the bag.

Leaving the shopping cart, Pierre exited the aisle at the rear of the store and headed toward the store entrance by an adjacent aisle.

Calls for an ambulance erupted as Carlos and Mendoza passed calmly, but quickly through the store’s exit.

Behind the Brink’s security truck idled a late model European sedan, Mendoza slid into the back seat next to Pierre, a Frenchman’s beret now casting a shadow over his face as he tuned a police scanner.

The driver, a heavysset man with a boxer’s nose and thick bushy black eyebrows, put the car in motion as both passenger doors shut. His large, capable, and gloved hands steered the vehicle out the rear exit of the shopping center onto a back street. He drove north as Mendoza and Carlos changed clothes.

Mendoza patted the shoulders of the two front men in silent appreciation.

Pierre turned up the volume of the police scanner. A man’s voice barked a report in progress, “...please be alert, these men are armed and dangerous. I repeat: these men are armed and dangerous. They are believed to be highly professional and thought to be heading south for the border. Descriptions are as follows: two men, both Latin descent, one approximately five eight, one hundred sixty pounds, black hair, possibly with a pony tail. The second man, between five-ten and six-two, heavier set with closely trimmed brown hair and well-dressed. A third man is suspected—no description yet. Getaway vehicle is unknown at this time. All suspect information and queries should be directed to Lieutenant Peabody—Officer-en-Route.”

After the report finished, all four men in the northbound sedan laughed, releasing some of the adrenaline.

“All right,” said Mendoza to the driver, “head to Rancho Bernardo Road, then travel west until the dead end at a dirt road. Looks like the cops are hot on our trail, huh? Good job guys, only five minutes in and out.

“Es la verdad, amigo.” Carlos laughed, pulling on a gray hooded sweatshirt. He freed his long brown, braided ponytail, and added, “See how I stuck la mujer?”

Pierre eyed him. “That shit fascinates you, no? You one twisted....”

“Chu know what is, man. The passing of another’s life makes me feel more alive,” said Carlos, enjoying the thrill of a successful mission.

Mendoza gazed out the window at the desolate, sparsely treed landscape until Pierre tapped him with a disposable cell phone.

“I think we have a new M.O. for bank heists. That’s three in four months. The stinkin’ cops don’t even have a clue.”

Mendoza held up a hand, then texted a message to an email address: ‘Dr Suess, cat in hat. Joseph has donned coat. He stands on corner.’

The car jounced along the dirt road as an intermittent chain link fence ran along the driver’s side. Bordering a natural preserve, hillocks of dirt rose to small hills in the distance as chaparral foliage thickened. The driver parked just past the transfer vehicle—a dark gray Mitsubishi sedan with out-of-state plates.

With expedience derived from strict training, they switched to the new vehicle, leaving the original spotless.

Mendoza instructed the driver to take the interstate north toward Glendale. He turned to Pierre, and said, “When we arrive on site, take the money to the safe but leave out the usual bonuses and driver’s fee.”

Mendoza pulled out a PDA to log in some notes as the men fell silent. For all but Carlos, the newest member of the group, this operation was routine, an assignment toward a higher goal. Mendoza had only told him that it was a high-tech robbery ring and Pierre was his right hand man. Observing the stillness of the San Gorgonio and San Jacinto mountain ranges in the distance he rubbed his chin, awed by how easy it was to make pawns of simple minds. In truth, all of them were dispensable, even him.

Years ago he had been sucked into the sensuality of skillful slaughter like Carlos. But now, the satisfaction of such action was gone. All that remained was a rotting carcass covered with olive toned flesh.

As this life had conditioned him, he set aside his thoughts and relaxed into the seat. A smile crossed his face. Now, he worked as the head of Special Ops Division within a corporation. The money-for-blood mercenary days were over. This position had a higher purpose: global peace or so he was told.

* * *

ENOCH Corporation HQ, Reston, Virginia
Thursday, 2:03 P.M.

In front of the rows of theater seats in the auditorium, his back to the stage, Jones surveyed the demonstration attendees. The moment he had waited ten years for was here: unveiling the project. He rubbed his hands together and motioned to his assistant, Kelly, a petite, blonde-headed, green-eyed woman in her middle twenties, who had just appeared in the auditorium. Before he could cue the cameramen, Peter Wellington raised a hand and spoke, effectively hiding a British accent.

“Excuse me. Is the frequency of the signal passed through the various devices susceptible to interception?”

“I’m sorry, you are?”

“Smith.” Peter gave the alias printed on the invitation. “Peter Smith.”

“The truth, Mr. Smith, is that most wireless frequencies are susceptible to pirating, but our devices come with state of the art filters, unlike the Bluetooth technology.”

Peter nodded, eyeing a heavysset man with a beard two rows in front of him, hand upraised.

In a gruff voice the man asked, “Doesn’t this just do the same thing as those RFID things?”

“Mr. Densmore, Radio Frequency Identification Devices are designed for tracking assets, human or otherwise, while our device influences behavior,” said Jones, then reluctantly motioned to the woman next to Peter, who held up her hand.

“As a business owner with a scientific background, I’m curious as to the external validity of your demonstration with only four subjects. What could it possibly show us that could be extrapolated to larger populations?”

Jones regarded her with a warm smile, despite the further delay.

“Ms. Christie, today is a demonstration of the effectiveness of the device, not a research study to prove the validity of it. Now, we’re behind schedule. Let’s begin.” Then, in a hushed tone, as if an evangelist to a congregation, he added, “Pay attention to the auditory and visual cues displayed by our volunteers and see the power of the sensory-motor destabilization device.”

The cameraman for set ‘A’ pointed to the large muscular man, who reached for the phone in front of him as it rang.

“Hel ... hello,” said Eileen, the large woman on set ‘B’. Her eyes darted around the set as if expecting something to happen. She shifted her feet, causing her pink dress to dance.

“Eileen, it’s me, Phil. How are you?” Her husband tried to appear relaxed, though he shifted his body as if uncomfortable.

“Oh, fine I guess. Have you enjoyed our time with the ENOCH folks?” Eileen fidgeted with a pencil and paper on the podium.

As Phil and his wife conversed, the man’s muscular body trembled. He grabbed hold of the podium for stability. All of sudden, he exclaimed, “Uh, oh ... soometh ... ing is happen ... ning...”

Hearing irregular breathing from the man she had known for over fifteen years, Eileen’s face registered dismay. Her eyes jumped from the phone to the audience where she thought Dr. Jones might be. She would have been more horrified had she been able to see the contorted postural changes taking place throughout her husband’s capable frame.

Peter watched the man’s shoulders elevate and roll forward, while the chest cavity sank and the hips pushed forward. The previously sturdy stance with solid legs beneath the upper body had now transformed into the look of an overworked bartender—legs spread, leaning into a bar. The trembling ceased, leaving the image of a man, unsteady and unsure.

Phil reassured his wife that everything was fine, sounding less than confident.

“You sound really odd, dear. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, no problem. You know me, strong as an uh...” Phil’s eyebrows rose then descended into a frown. He gripped the podium tighter. “What’s the ... how’s that saying go?”

Peter leaned forward in his seat as Eileen’s posture underwent changes. Her head now tilted to the left with the left shoulder lower and the left hip in an elevated position, causing her weight to shift to the right leg. She pursed her lips and took hold of the podium for balance.

“Ox, honey. Strong as an ox is how it goes. I’m surprised at you. You use that cliché for yourself all the time.”

Phil indicated that other than the tremors and forgetting that saying, nothing had changed. Gail, the small-boned woman next to him, stared in disbelief.

Peter remained silent as a murmur of comments ran through the audience.

“All right, thank you,” said Jones, voice thundering through the loudspeakers. “Stop your conversation and allow the other pair to begin.”

“Thank you Phil and Eileen for your cooperation,” said Kelly, who stood at the front and off to the side of the auditorium. She offered a wonderful smile, displaying small, straight, white teeth.

Phil and Eileen handed over the phones to their stage counterparts. Each gave that rather lost smile displayed by a stranger in a foreign city trying to be friendly to all while hiding the terror at feeling utterly alone.

Gail dialed a number that rang the phone in her husband’s hand on set ‘B’.

“Hello, my sweet, how ya doing?”

“I feel ... quite pleasant actually. And you?”

Jerry pushed the black plastic framed glasses onto his nose. His tall frame stood erect and his eyes focused on a spot on the floor in front of the podium.

“I feel sort of tingly all over.”

“Wow, that sounds wonderful. Did Dr. Jones give you something that we didn’t get?”

“Oh stop,” Gail said, eyes glittering. Her voice evoked warmth.

To Peter, she appeared encapsulated in her own little world and oblivious to the unstable bulk of the man perched beside her. On the other set, Jerry shifted his gaze to the right as if taking an internal inventory. When he spoke, his voice sounded calm, even melodious.

“If I hold still for a moment, I sort of feel it too, but you’re much more in tune with those things. That is one of the things I cherish most about you, your deep sensibilities.”

“Oh Jerry, that’s so nice. It’s so unlike you to be so forthright in front of all these people.”

“See honey, during the time with our nice hosts at ENOCH, I’ve been thinking. That whole thing I have about public displays of affection is a bit ridiculous. I feel like turning over a

new leaf. And what better place than here, in front of all these fine people? If I want to express how much I love you, I will. Damn anyone who doesn't like it."

Smoothing his mustache with a finger, Peter noted that this couple exhibited confidence and focus, unlike the previous couple. It was obvious the devices could create both positive and negative changes.

Just then, Jones stopped the couple. The lights came up on the audience and dimmed on the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the audience," Kelly said, "please give our volunteers a nice round of applause."

Enthusiastic clapping rolled through the audience as the wall on stage between the sets retracted backstage, allowing the couples to reunite. Jerry and Gail both bowed while Phil and Eileen held onto each other, more for stability.

Jones clapped as he inspected the audience. He gave a nod of approval to Kelly. At that moment, behind them, Phil's entire frame shuddered, stronger than before. He clutched at his chest. In seconds, he crumpled to the floor with a resounding thud.

Jones whirled around and grabbed the cell phone on his belt. Recognizing an emergency, he called for a crash cart and medical personnel.

From the stage, Eileen screamed for help, dropping to her knees and cradling her husband's head. A cameraman dropped down beside her and began to check Phil's vital signs.

"Please be calm, ladies and gentlemen. We have emergency medical personnel on staff to handle such a scenario." Jones began moving to a side door, and added, "Everyone, remain seated. Stay in your seats! I will return shortly to answer any questions you may have."

From the auditorium, Peter watched Jones take command on stage, giving the appearance of a competent, concerned businessman. At that precise moment, he decided to reach his contact in the Nation's Capitol as soon as possible. The new information gleaned must be passed on.

On the stage the medical team removed Phil's lifeless body.

A motivational speaker combines forces with a former counterintelligence agent.

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