

Paradise is a small, simple town. But sometimes these quiet little communities are the perfect venue for those with more sinister motives. In The Seduction of Paradise, Joe McGowen and his family run head-on into the corruption and deceit one would only expect in the dark underworld of large cities.

The Seduction of Paradise

by Kevin J. Ward

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THE SEDUCTION OF PARADISE

KEVIN J. WARD

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Ancient One, you have great wisdom. Please tell me, when may I rest from all my efforts and know that I have given enough?

Young lad, you say that I have wisdom, but I cannot answer your question, for no one can ever know when one has truly given enough. But can you tell me, when will no one benefit from your continued efforts?

Prologue

The tropical sun shone brightly on the white-sand beach at the base of the huge monolith rising several hundred feet into the western sky. The rock face of the cliff was sheer and ominous, preventing any access to the land beyond for miles in each direction. It was nature in its most raw and rugged form. The crashing waves could scarcely be heard by the two men sitting on the veranda atop the cliff, virtually undetectable from any vantage point other than an aircraft directly overhead. The veranda was just a small part of a magnificent estate, appearing out of context in the otherwise unspoiled jungle surroundings.

The older man, wearing a spotless white suit, appeared passively content as a steady stream of fragrant smoke circled up from his fine Montecristo. His skin was a deep olive, and his white hair and beard were neatly trimmed. The younger man wore a pair of dungarees and a loose-fitting cotton shirt with enough buttons open to expose a muscular chest and a heavy but somewhat gaudy gold chain. He was black, but he was not African. He may have been Jamaican or Haitian, or possibly even Cuban. His teeth sparkled like polished ivory when he smiled. They both spoke English, but each had a very strong yet uniquely different accent. They could have been on an island in the Caribbean or possibly on the coast somewhere in Central America, or even in one of the remote areas of South America. But where they were was not important. The only point of significance was the subject of their conversation.

“So, my friend, you do not approve of my plan,” the white-suited man with a commanding air stated.

“It is not that I do not approve, sir, it is just that this operation is being handled so differently than ever before. Are you sure of all the risks involved?”

“One is never totally sure, that is why it is called risk. But we are moving into a new area where people are different. A good businessman first develops an understanding of the people he wishes to deal with, and then plans his strategy accordingly. I fear that the old ‘strong arm’ methods will not be effective in this new location,

and there is far too much potential business at stake to risk losing it all on hasty action. I believe this new approach will be much more appropriate. Much planning has been done, preparations have been underway for months, key personnel are already in place. Everything will be ready soon. I feel that the risks have been adequately controlled.”

“I am sure you are right, sir. You have always been right in the past. But I must admit I am very surprised you were able to get the support you needed from the people in...what is the name of the town?”

“Paradise, my friend. And what a wonderful name for the focal point of our new business venture. As far as soliciting support, there is a lesson that you should learn from this: everyone has his price. Honesty and morality in a person simply mean he has a higher price than others, but everyone has a limit at which their standards dissolve into the insignificant façade that they really are. A smart businessman will determine that limit for the people he requires services of, and he will use it to his advantage.”

He stopped for a moment, a small but arrogant smile on his face. “It is surprising how low that limit is for people in a small town, like Paradise. You will learn, my young friend, that loyalty is only as strong as the dollars attached to it. Why do you think that I pay you so handsomely?”

He laughed deeply and heartily, slapping the younger man on the back. “You are aggressive, you are strong and determined, you like to move quickly and forcibly. I like that. Those are the qualities that make you useful to me. But this time, it is patience that is required, patience and planning. Do not worry, my young friend, nothing can go wrong. And if something should happen, we will always be safe here.”

Book One

The Seduction

We humans, of superior intellect to all God's creatures, pride ourselves on our ability to distinguish good from evil, to choose right from wrong. We hold honor and integrity as the greatest virtues attributable to an individual. But one constant throughout all history is the relentless threat to these virtues by the overpowering temptation of material wealth. Money, in whatever form, brings to the surface the dark side that lurks within us all. The desire for material wealth can eat away at the qualities we all hold so dear, and as the value of the monetary temptation increases, the value of our soul is diminished, until even the strongest of people can find themselves compromising every standard—victims of their own greed, living out their lives as empty, broken shells of what they might have been.

Chapter 1

Joseph McGowen made one final review of the documents on his desk before leaving work for the evening. It was his habit to make sure everything of importance was either completed before he went home or at least properly organized for an efficient start in the morning. As the director of a large research and development department, he usually did not have the luxury of taking time in the morning to prepare for the day.

He walked out into the warm spring air. It was a beautiful afternoon, the kind that a person looks forward to during the long cold months of a Minnesota winter. The late afternoon sun cast a red glow on the Minneapolis skyline. He paused for a moment before stepping into his Durango to reflect on the beauty of the city and the surrounding landscape. He loved Minnesota. He had always loved it, and the fact that he had been gone for so long made days like this all the more gratifying.

Leaving downtown Minneapolis, Joe headed northwest on I-94, then exited north onto Highway 169, toward the small suburb of Paradise. The town got its name, as legend had it, because its founding fathers believed it to be the only place on earth that was comparable to heaven. The current populace of Paradise, though not quite so pretentious as their forefathers, still felt that the town was a wonderful place to live and raise a family. Joe and his wife, Sheri, agreed, although Joe recognized that part of his feelings may be due to nostalgia, for Paradise was the town where he and his younger brother, Ryan, were born and raised. But through his extensive travels throughout the world, Joe was familiar with many places and cultures, and he knew it was more than just memories that made him love this place; it was a good town with good honest people, the kind of town that a person was proud to claim as his home.

Most suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul—or any large city, for that matter—tended to be nothing more than sprawling housing developments for people who worked in the city. Paradise was different. It was a small town, about fifteen thousand in population, located twenty minutes northwest of downtown Minneapolis. By

definition, it was a suburb, but unlike a typical suburb, Paradise did not develop as an overflow from the big city. In fact, it was actually older than Minneapolis by a few years. It was originally a trading settlement at the junction of the Mississippi and Whiskey Rivers. Due to a number of reasons involving business and politics, Paradise never grew for many years while Minneapolis mushroomed with prosperity. The people of Paradise amusingly referred to Minneapolis as their southern suburb. Yes, Paradise was a nice little town, but to Joe and Sheri, the best part of Paradise was the people themselves. It was a community that truly felt like a family.

Joe crossed the Mississippi River, which formed the southern border of Paradise. To his right, about four hundred yards away, ran the Whiskey River, which actually bisected the town before it emptied into the Mississippi. For the first mile or so, the Whiskey was completely concealed from view by thick clusters of pines, oaks, and elms. Joe passed this wooded area and turned left onto the residential road of Bryant Street, drove about a mile, turned right onto Port Avenue, and, one block later, turned left onto Cottonwood Drive. The McGowens lived in a nice but modest home a half mile down on Cottonwood on the left side, just one block north of the Mississippi. This was a fairly new section of town with a considerable amount of undeveloped land. The area between Port Avenue and their house was densely wooded with large oaks and pines (no cottonwoods, strangely enough). This area not only provided privacy for their family but also served as a wonderful playground for their three children.

Immediately after turning onto Cottonwood, Joe knew something was very wrong. Up ahead were three police cars and an ambulance, all with their lights flashing. At first, it appeared to

Joe that the vehicles were parked in his driveway.

My God, Joe thought. Something has happened to one of my kids!

He felt his heart racing as he quickly covered the half mile to his house. As he approached, he felt a tremendous sense of relief when he realized that the activity was not at his home but at his next-door neighbor's, Harry and Fran Rosten. They were a couple in their mid-sixties who had lived in Paradise most of their lives. Joe knew of

them when he was a boy, and they had become close friends during the past year as neighbors. Almost instantly, after feeling his relief, a new sense of dread set in as he realized that something must be seriously wrong with his friends.

Joe pulled into his driveway and saw Sheri standing by the edge of the yard, observing the activity but keeping out of the way. A number of their neighbors were doing the same. He could not see Harry or Fran anywhere. Hearing the car, Sheri looked up to see Joe and instantly ran to meet him. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks glistened from recent tears.

Joe jumped out as Sheri nearly fell into his arms, burying her face into his shoulder. As she tried to speak, she lost the composure that she had been maintaining and, for a few moments, could manage little more than uncontrolled babbling.

"Take it easy, Sheri," Joe said, holding her tight and stroking her hair. "Just be patient. It will come." He was having difficulty fighting his own anxious anticipation, but he knew he could not press her. Finally she was able to force out a few words.

"It's Harry," she stammered. "He's...he's dead!"

"What?" Joe blurted. "He can't be! What the hell happened?"

Sheri again lost her composure. Then, with a great amount of effort, she nearly screamed, "He killed himself! He hanged himself in his garage!"

Joe was horrified. *No*, he thought. *I know Harry. He wouldn't do this. Not to himself. Not to Fran. Oh my God, what about Fran?*

"Sheri, where is Fran?"

"In her house. She found Harry herself no more than half an hour ago. I heard her screaming and came out to see what was wrong. Oh, Joe, it was so terrible! She was convulsing. I thought she was going to collapse right here in our driveway. I think they have her sedated now. I heard a doctor or paramedic or whoever those people are say that she will be all right."

"Poor Fran," was all that Joe could think of to say. And then,

"What about the kids?"

"They're all inside. They don't know what's happened, but they obviously know something is wrong."

“Sheri, let’s go in. We’re just in the way out here. We need to explain this to the kids.”

Chapter 2

Seventeen years ago, in 1988, Joe McGowen had left Minnesota to attend the United States Naval Academy. His deep love for his country, along with his strong interest in history, seemed to suggest the academy was a perfect fit for him. However, as is often the case, reality did not match expectations. The high ideals that are associated with the academy seemed to be more myth than truth, something to create an image for the public more than standards to live by. Not that the academy was a bad place; Joe felt it was an excellent school. But as far as having high standards of morals or ethics, he felt it was no different than most schools, and maybe a notch below some. After two years of frustrating disillusionment, he decided the academy was just not the place for him.

While the decision to leave was difficult, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. He entered the University of Minnesota and graduated two years later as a structural engineer. This was the first of a number of incidents in his life that convinced him any problem could be converted to an advantage with the proper attitude and effort. It was during his two years at the university that he first realized how much he had grown to love Minnesota.

Within two weeks after graduation, he married Sheri Murphy, an attractive girl who was as sweet as she was pretty, and her being of Irish descent was a definite plus. He never consciously looked for an Irish girl, but his heritage was important to him, so he could not deny the possibility that he had a subconscious voice influencing him in that direction.

Joe and Sheri lived for four years in a manner many people would consider “typical Midwestern.” They bought a house, had a baby girl name Maureen, owned two cars, and did most of their social activity as a family. After Maureen was born, Sheri quit her job as an elementary school teacher to become a full-time mother. They were the perfect *Leave It to Beaver* family. In 1996, Joe was dealt a painful blow that would subsequently prove to be another blessing, the second such experience of his life: the company he worked at ran into serious financial issues, and he, along with many

of his colleagues, was laid off. While such an event can damage or even destroy a marriage, it only strengthened Joe and Sheri's commitment to each other and to their family. After a number of months of job hunting, Joe was finally forced to accept a position at General Dynamics in San Diego. It was an excellent job, but it obviously meant relocation out of Minnesota. They both deeply dreaded the idea of moving, but with their savings nearly exhausted, there was simply no choice.

Eight years in California proved to be exciting and prosperous. A son, Brandon, was added to the family soon after they began their lives there. Joe found his job to be personally as well as financially rewarding, and all in all, the McGowens adjusted very well to life in California. But seven and a half years after their move, a somewhat unexpected daughter, whom they christened Katelin, arrived. Somehow this third child caused them to reevaluate their lives and the goals they had for their children. The strong calling to return to Minnesota was rekindled.

With a much more impressive résumé and a strong economy,

Joe had many more options opened to him, and finding a good position in Minneapolis was not difficult. He had been hired as the director of research and development for Defense Tech

Systems, the largest defense contractor in Minnesota. Upon their return, they marveled at how fast the years had passed. It almost seemed that they had never left.

Now, in April of 2005, Joe knew in his heart he would never leave again. He and his family were content. Life was good.

On Sunday morning, two days after the traumatic experience of Harry Rosten's suicide, Joe was up early reading the newspaper, but his mind was still on Harry. He just could not believe Harry had done this. He had always heard that people contemplating suicide could appear normal and even happy to others who were not trained to see the symptoms, but that was not good enough for Joe. He knew Harry. His business was going well. He loved his wife and his home. He was the oldest member of the Paradise city council and was

personally responsible for many of the improvements made to the town over the years. He was always making things better for people.

What Joe enjoyed most about Harry were their impromptu backyard visits when they were mowing, raking, tree trimming, or doing any of a number of other tasks necessary to keep a house looking nice. Joe found these jobs to be somewhat monotonous, but Harry loved them. He thoroughly enjoyed working outside to keep his home beautiful. They would routinely take a break from their work to discuss different ideas of yard grooming, and Harry's enthusiasm always inspired Joe and lifted his spirits. Harry was always so upbeat, so positive. And now, out of the blue, he kills himself. Joe just could not accept that, but then, when it came right down to it, he really had no choice.

Fran had been taken to the hospital for a couple of days. There was nothing wrong with her physically; she just needed time to adjust. She would be coming home today, and Joe and Sheri knew that they would have to be very strong for her. It would take her a long time to get over this, and a part of Joe doubted that she would ever truly get over it.

Late that afternoon, the phone rang. Sheri answered it, and immediately, her eyes began to glisten with tears. Joe knew instantly who was on the other end.

"Oh, Fran," Sheri said, in almost a whisper. "We're so very sorry." A short pause and then, "Of course we will. We'll be right over." She replaced the phone and turned to Joe.

"Fran needs our help in getting something down from her attic. She's not able to climb up there by herself. I think maybe she's just looking for some company."

Maureen and Brandon stayed at home, content to have time to themselves in which they could do things, like pick their own TV show, without interference from parents. Sheri thought it best to take eighteen-month-old Katelin with them. The three of them made the short walk over to Fran's house, knowing she needed companionship and support but not being confident that they were strong enough to provide it. They were not totally sure of what they were expecting

from Fran, but it certainly was nothing like what they encountered. She met them at the door and was all smiles.

"Hi, kids," she called out as they were coming up her walk. "Come on in. It's good to see friendly faces again after being in that depressing old hospital."

"Hello, Fran," they each said, surprise clearly showing on their faces.

"Joe, I hate to trouble you, but Harry put a box of old photos up in our attic about two years ago. They weren't anything special. In fact, at the time, I wanted to throw them away. Just some silly pictures of me and Harry and some of our friends around the house. I got to thinking that this might be a good time to take them down, but be damned if I am strong enough to climb up there at my age."

"No problem, Fran," Joe said. "I'm glad to do it. I might even like looking at those pictures myself."

Fran led them down to the end of a hallway. In the ceiling was a recessed piece of finished oak, obviously the entrance to the attic. She had a stepladder standing ready. Joe climbed the ladder, lifted the door up into the dark cavity, and raised his head and shoulders up through the opening. It was very dark, but he did not have to see far. Just inches from the frame of the door was an old box flowing over with pictures, a few of which had slid off the top and fallen to the floor. A fairly thick and even layer of dust covered everything. Almost everything, that is.

He was not sure why it caught his eye, except possibly because it was the only thing that had no dust cover whatsoever. It was a simple manila envelope, the size that would hold a standard piece of writing paper. It was very light, containing only a few sheets of paper. He almost ignored it but finally could not control his curiosity.

"Fran," he said, "I assume you know there is a small package up here. By the looks of it, it couldn't have been here more than a few days. It's the only thing that has virtually no dust on it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she responded. "But bring it down. I'm anxious to see what treasures Harry has buried around here."

Joe climbed down the ladder, holding the box of pictures in his hands with the package tucked under his arm. It was clear that everyone was eager to see what was inside. He set the box down and held up the package. Written by hand across the front with a large black marker was the word Council.

"Oh, that's where that thing went," Fran remarked. "Harry gets those packages every month from the city council. Each council member is supposed to review the information before their monthly meetings. Then they send them back to city hall by way of a police squad car. I always used to tease Harry that they protect those things as if they contained top-secret material. On the few occasions that I saw any of the information, it generally involved things such as proposed ordinances or plans for repaving roads. Certainly nothing that most of us would consider interesting."

"It sounds like you have been looking for it for a while," Sheri stated.

"No, not really. But Spencer Thurman came to the hospital and asked me if I knew where it was."

"You're kidding!" Joe cried. "He actually confronted you in the hospital? Couldn't he wait a few days!"

"It did kind of upset me. In fact, if you don't mind me saying so, it really pissed me off! But you know Spencer."

They did know Spencer. He was the forty-six-year-old chairman of the city council. While he was basically a nice person, he was very excitable and had an overly inflated ego. He was consumed with self-importance and struggled with the knowledge that not everyone shared his views. But this seemed extreme, even for him.

"I wonder why Harry put it up there," Joe asked, more thinking out loud than asking a question.

"It sure beats me," Fran answered. "He was so absentminded he probably never knew he left it there. I'm not sure what he was doing in the attic at all. The only things we have up there are these pictures. And from what you say, Joe, it sounds like they weren't disturbed at all."

“Well, it’s probably nothing,” Joe remarked. “It’s still sealed, so I suppose we shouldn’t open it. If you want, Fran, I’ll notify the police and have them come and get it.”

“I would appreciate that, Joe. Thank you.”

The next half hour was spent looking over the many photographs from the old box. Fran acted very pleased with them, but both Joe and Sheri noticed that she seemed distant, almost cold. After all, Harry wasn’t even buried yet!

Finally, Sheri felt it was time to go. Fran thanked them and walked them to the door. As they were about to leave, Sheri felt that something needed to be said.

“Fran, you seem so strong. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Fran’s eyes immediately began to get moist. She had trouble blurring out her words. “I don’t know how to act or what to say. All I know is that if I don’t try to be myself, I’ll come completely apart.”

She bowed her head and covered her face with her hands. Brief light sobbing could be heard. “How could Harry have done this to me? Why? I thought he was happy. I don’t understand what went wrong. Don’t mistake this charade for strength. I’ve always been a coward at heart.”

Sheri could not hold back her own tears. She reached out and embraced Fran.

Joe put his hand on Fran’s shoulder. “We’re always here for you, Fran,” he said quietly.

“I know you are,” Fran replied, regaining her composure. “Do you think I would have come home if I didn’t know that?”

“If there’s anything you need, please don’t hesitate to ask,” Sheri said, almost in a whisper.

“Well, there is just one thing.”

“Name it,” Joe responded.

“I’ll need help with the funeral.”

Joe looked at Sheri, knowing she would be the one to help Fran the most. Sheri swallowed hard, then smiled. “Of course, Fran, of course. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

They went out the front door and walked slowly home, Sheri clinging tightly to Katelin, Joe loosely holding the manila package.

That night, after the kids were in bed, Joe sat looking at the package. Strange, he thought. Nothing in the attic was disturbed. He did not know what Harry was doing up there, but it was clear he did not accidentally forget the package. His only purpose for going to the attic must have been to put it there. But why? To hide it? If so, from whom? Fran? It didn't seem to make sense. But then, can you really make sense of the actions of a man only hours before he kills himself?

A distant thought roamed through Joe's subconscious. Harry was not a complex or mysterious man. Now here were two incidents, his suicide and hiding this simple package, that occurred closely together. There couldn't be a connection, could there?

Joe thought it best to just let it go. Who knows, if Harry was here, he would probably have a rational explanation for the whole mess. It might not even seem so strange if it were not for the fact that Harry's suicide was so shocking. The one thing Joe did know was that he should inform the police immediately that he had the package. He picked up the phone and dialed the Paradise

Police Department.

"Paradise police," a man barked into the phone. "Officer Williams speaking."

It was Bob Williams. Joe was familiar with him but did not know him well. He was not originally from Paradise. He was a young man in his mid-twenties who had more enthusiasm than sense. He was often the butt of the generally tasteless pranks that police officers tend to play on one another. By and large, he was considered harmless.

"Bob, this is Joe McGowen. I just came from Fran Rosten's. She found a package that must have been Harry's. It's a sealed manila envelope marked Council. I assume it belongs to the city council. Fran said a squad car usually picks these things up, and I was wondering if you could send someone over."

"Well, Joe, we're pretty busy down here. I'm not sure if anyone is free. Besides, the council information is normally sent out at the end of the month. The next one isn't due out for two weeks."

Joe was irritated. "Look, Bob, I don't care if you want this thing or not. I'll keep it until tomorrow, and then I'm going to toss it. I just wanted somebody to know it was here, in case it was important."

He slammed down the phone then immediately started feeling guilty. It had been a long couple of days, but there was no sense in taking it out on poor Bob. Maybe he would drop it off tomorrow after work. He needed to sleep now.

Twenty minutes later, just as Joe and Sheri were crawling into bed, a car screeched to a stop in front of their house.

"What in the hell is that!" Joe cried.

Sheri quickly put on her robe and ran to the front window. She pulled back the curtain and peered out. "It's the police," she said with surprise. "I think it's Bob Williams."

No sooner had she spoken than they were startled by a loud rapid pounding on the front door. Joe opened it up to find Bob dancing impatiently, looking like a little boy who needed to go to the bathroom.

"What on earth is wrong with you, Bob?" Joe bellowed out angrily.

"Do you have the Rosten package, Joe?" Bob shot back. "I decided I would take it tonight."

"Of course I have it. I told you that twenty minutes ago. What the hell made you so interested?"

"Just doing my job, Joe. Are you sure it hasn't been opened?"

"Does it matter?"

"Just answer my fucking question, Joe! Has the package been opened?"

Joe glanced at Sheri. She caught Joe's gaze with her eyes and gave just the slightest shake of her head. Joe knew this meant that he should not get into it with Bob. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "No it hasn't. See for yourself."

He handed the package to Bob, who quickly examined the seal, first visually and then by clawing at it with his fingernails. Finally satisfied, a slight smile came to his face.

"Thanks, Joe." And he was gone.

"This whole town's gone nuts," Joe said.

“Come to bed, Joe,” Sheri said quietly. “Let’s just worry about ourselves tonight.”

Officer Williams sat across a large mahogany desk from an elderly man with distinguished white hair. The plush carpet was a deep red; the walls were paneled in dark oak. Behind the desk was a large fireplace, and above it hung the head of a huge moose, looking fierce in his death. It was the kind of room that you instantly knew belonged to a powerful man.

The coldness of the man behind the desk was not a result of being angry or upset; it was simply a void of emotion altogether. Not that he couldn’t create the façade of emotion when the situation required it, but in the privacy of his own world, his empty, almost lifeless character revealed itself. It was the look of pure evil. He sat slowly swirling a glass of brandy, staring at the amber liquid as if contemplating some profound thought. On his pinkie finger he wore an exquisite ruby ring. He spoke softly, calmly, “Has anyone seen the contents of this package, Bob?”

“No, sir,” Bob replied, somewhat nervously. “No one at all.”

“It is very important that you are absolutely sure.”

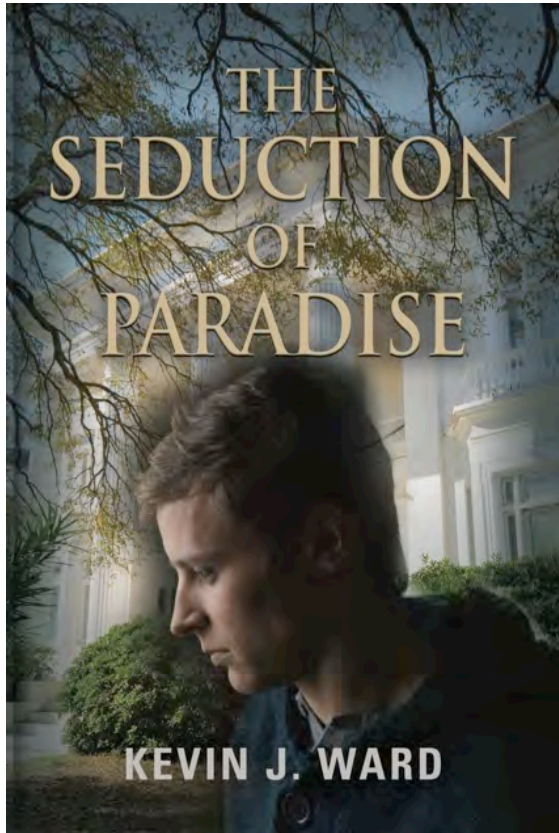
“I’m positive, sir. I’m as sure as I can be. I got it directly from Joe McGowen, the guy who found it at Rosten’s place. It was still sealed when he gave it to me.”

“Joe McGowen,” the man muttered to himself, as if making a mental note for later recall. Then he looked back at Williams. “So then I can assume you are the only person besides myself who has seen this information.”

“That’s the truth, sir.” Bob could not resist a small smile. He was beginning to feel important.

“That’s good, Bob. That’s very good.” He slowly leaned forward in his plush leather chair and rested his elbows on the top of his large desk. Looking up, he smiled warmly at Bob, but the coldness in his eyes only intensified. Then calmly, but with a swiftness that left no time to react, he produced a .9 mm Beretta from inside his coat,

aimed, and fired. Bob Williams's face disappeared into a mass of blood and brains.



Paradise is a small, simple town. But sometimes these quiet little communities are the perfect venue for those with more sinister motives. In The Seduction of Paradise, Joe McGowen and his family run head-on into the corruption and deceit one would only expect in the dark underworld of large cities.

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