

## 6 Triage

She was there; he could sense it. She was pulling his heart deeper, carrying his mind, his lungs, and his hands, and his legs and body and everything else that he physically possessed deeper and deeper into the darkness of the abyss below. But he still could not see her. But there, a shimmer from above caught her wiggling fingers, like eels sticking out from seaweed trying to capture prey and then her hand and he reached for it, his fingers just brushing by hers as she continued to sink. Her arm stuck above the mucky water and then he saw her face; that lovely, beautiful face and it was in sheer terror and he could feel his heart descend more and fear raked over him. Her body convulsed, just once, and then she sank, a silent scream locked on her lips as her lifeless eyes faded into the void.

There was no more reason to continue and so he allowed the last of his oxygen to slither from his mouth and he tried to inhale but the water would not enter his lungs and he began screaming...

Just as the icy tentacles were grabbing him from the deep, dark water his cell phone began dancing a marimba on the bedside table and the dream came crashing down. He glanced at the clock and it read eleven-fifteen and he turned to his window and he could see the twinkling lights of west Houston spread out into infinity. He didn't bother with the cell phone. He turned away from the window and the woman lay on her side facing away from Jack. At first he didn't know who she was. Her hair was red so she wasn't the girl from the pool. Then it dawned on him. It was Morgan. She lived on the second floor and was an

occasional diner guest and, *occasionally*, she extended her stay.

When you feel alone, when you face terror, the natural instinct is to reach out to another, to bring that other into loving, searching arms to comfort and reassure you that life is truly remarkable and that all the fear and hate and cruelty can be washed away with love: unadulterated, innocent love.

Jack didn't feel that. In fact he felt repulsed. Not from the girl, for she was quite lovely, but from himself, for allowing her into his room to share his bed and then to be with him when he felt so utterly alone. She could not comfort him in that way and he felt guilty for trying to make her into something she would never be. Later, he decided, he would gently wake her with a kiss her. Maybe he would make love to her again, if she wanted, and make her feel special but it would not bridge the gulf for him: How utterly narcissistic.

He quietly rose from the bed and crept to the closet as if creeping away from himself. He found a pair of gym shorts and an old tee shirt and departed his bedroom in favor of his office.

When Jack worked, which was becoming increasingly rare, he worked at his downtown office in White Tower. That office, based on Mo's, was manly, but here, in the sanctuary of his home his office was confined to a sleek glass top desk and contemporary furnishings. A pool table sat off to the side. There were two pinball machines and two slot machines occupying the right wall. There was also a fifty-five inch LCD with all the latest technological toys including several gaming systems.

White lived a dream. The building had been a failing office building and he bought it through White Commercial and turned it into one of the most upscale lofts in the city.

The ground floor had shops and Whitte's favorite Tex-Mex restaurant. The second floor had professional office space and above, lofts. Whitte's occupied the eleventh through thirteenth floors—the penthouse and yes, he was aware that the building was thirteen stories tall but neither the building's original owners nor Whitte believed in superstitious nonsense. In the middle of his loft he had carved out a walled-in two-story area where he could play a half-court basketball game or, by retracting the backboard, racquetball.

All the same as Jack was fast approaching middle age, there was no accompanying midlife crisis because his life was always a last gasp of youth while time slowly exposed the illusion.

In the corner of his office playpen was a fully stocked bar and so he mixed a T&T and ambled over to his desk. He punched a button on a consul and the shades over the floor to ceiling windows retreated. Just above the horizon he saw a broken spider web of lightening, a summer storm pushed up from the Gulf. His desk was uncluttered. In the center, his Mac and to the right a framed picture of his mother taken a year before she was diagnosed with dementia and his father standing in front of his toy, the Robinson Beta II helicopter which had carried his father into the Gulf of Mexico from where he had not returned.

He clicked the mouse and the screen came to life. The anomaly—if that's what you would call it—was found by accident.

He had driven home from Austin on Saturday. Friday night, after his meeting with

Mo he got too drunk and Joe the bartender had pushed him, with accompaniment, into a cab around two that morning. The two women with non-discriminating tastes left around five. At six, unable to sleep, he downed the last of the gin and curled up beneath the dark window as it silently turned orange and he cried. He fell asleep there and didn't wake until he heard a rattling at the door and some maniacal maid scream out, "Room service!"

When he arrived in Houston he came back to the loft, showered and then drove to The Houstonian to meet George Croswell for a late lunch. George was an amiable fellow, often quick with a platitude and a slap on the back. He had been Robert Whitte's closest confidant and it seemed, at times, that he was trying too hard to assume that relationship with Robert's son.

The fact of the matter was that Jack trusted him but not absolutely. Maybe it was because George was too likable, a man of all seasons, a chameleon for all occasions. He was like the eternal optimist that at some point you begin to hate because not all in life is wine and roses. And the fact that Croswell did not know, despite being the general counsel, where the original documentation concerning Spencer's investment in Whitte Oil & Gas either begged for incompetency or conspiracy. Incompetence, Whitte could handle.

All the same, they discussed Jack's meeting with Mo and how they might defend against the accusations of fraud, Mo's referral to Laura Menzinger of Smith and Swchieber—whom Croswell knew and respected—and Mo's suggestion that Jack look through some of the accounting to familiarize himself with how things were reported. George thought that was an excellent idea. And despite any misgivings he might have with Croswell, he found himself handing George the envelop containing the single sheet of paper with the words

that dragged the whole sordid Caribbean affair back into the light.

Croswell knew people, or so his father had intimated to Jack over the years. If ever there was a problem outside of the company, Robert had counseled his son; George could handle it. And George claimed that he could: A guy who worked in the government—Jay Humphries—could find out who had sent the letter. How can that be accomplished, Jack had asked. Oh, there are ways. Fingerprints on the envelop—are you sure you’re the only one who has handled it? Jack reminded him that probably fifty postmen had touched it. Yeah, I suppose so. But security cameras may have picked up who mailed it. Witnesses might be found. Faces recognized and names put to the faces. It sounded fanciful to Jack: cloak and dagger wasn’t his specialty.

“So, who is this Humphries?”

“He once worked for the FBI. He’s now the chief administrator for a small government agency that helps secure loans for businesses starting up in Afghanistan and Iraq. It’s called the Office of International Commerce or International Construction, or Cooperation or something like that. It’s OIC. That’s all I remember.”

“And why do you think he might be able to help?”

“It’s what he used to do,” Croswell explained with a wink and a nudge.

Sure, Jack thought, what the hell.

Then George said a curious thing: “Your personal account has become compromised. I had your accountant set up a new one and I want you to transfer in enough money for you to have a good time in the Caribbean next week.”

“Okay,” Jack said.

“I’ll email you all the particulars.”

After they disposed of that matter, Crowell returned to discussing the detail of the discovery work being done to mount a possible defense against the black cloud now parked over the Whitte Empire.

You would think that the matter would be an easy one, two, three but it, of course, wasn’t. WO&G’s financial books had been woefully stuck in the age of clerks with visors on their heads, hunched over drafting tables, squinting at small figures beneath the glow of a single bulb. As Whitte Industries expanded, a new enterprise system was needed and there was nothing available commercially that could adapt to new businesses that were not complementary to each other so Robert found a stereotypical geek with a dual Masters in IT and Accounting.

Finding an accounting system that was barely on life support, Simon Patel developed an enterprise-wide system and fittingly called it Triage. Robert realized he could sell the system to other companies and so, to keep young Simon happy, started Patel +Whitte, or PW—and yes, lewd jokes about male submission before a domineering woman littered the IT world with emotionally arrested systems engineers sniggering and snorting in their cubicles.

Additionally, PW developed new software for oil and gas exploration and production applications and then turned its attention elsewhere and developed what, Jack was told, was a masterpiece: Mirage. All Jack knew was that it was an Internet security system that fit seamlessly onto Triage. It was currently being beta tested within the U.S. government somewhere—Jack couldn’t remember if anyone told him what agency was

doing the testing—but the commercial value was unlimited. It had been something his father had wanted and had developed with the government in mind. Why? He never bothered to ask.

When the new system had come online, the system conversion had been a nightmare. Tough decisions had been made as to what would be converted into the system and what would be dumped into storage boxes and left for rats in a downtown storage room. More than likely, anything to do with Spencer Ranch was being eaten by the rats. Regardless, since he had returned to his loft on Saturday afternoon, he had been exploring Whitte Industries through its electronic face, trying to find anything that had to do with the Spencer Ranch field and gaining a feel for how the accounting systems worked.

So now, sipping on his T&T while Morgan slumbered, Jack was again, attacking the files. Beyond all of the accounting and corporate files, Triage also linked external bank accounts to seamlessly allow funds to transfer from bank to bank, state to state and, in some rare instances, country to country and always be instantly reflected in the proper internal accounts. Jack even had his own personal accounts integrated with the system and it was when he was browsing bank accounts, looking for any payments going to anything Spencer Ranch related, that he remembered what George had told him about his new personal account.

He clicked on a link and then entered thirty thousand into the bank account application with the target being the new account George had set up for him. Out of the

corner of his eye he saw a window pop open and an account flash and increase by thirty thousand dollars. Oops. He tried to back out of it. He clicked on the account icon that had just popped up. It was an old account, set up when WO&G still did business in Venezuela. When Hugo Chavez had nationalized the particular oil field that WO&G had been partnering with Texaco to develop, they had abandoned the country but obviously, the account at Banco de Mercantil Petróleo was still opened.

His high school Spanish sucked so he could barely navigate the bank's website but he was finally able to sign in to examine the account's history and he sat back in his chair, surprised, when he saw that the account had been extremely active. In the past three years, the account had an average balance of over a million dollars but each month there was a deposit made from twenty different banks for a total sum of five million. From there, large withdrawals were made, most electronically. But there were some irregularly timed withdrawals for amounts no greater than fifteen thousand dollars from a branch located in Castries, St. Lucia in the southern Caribbean.

He pulled up the most recent transactions. Within the last ten minutes, there had been a deposit of fifteen hundred dollars from twenty different bank accounts into Banco de Mercantil Petróleo. Twenty times fifteen hundred equals thirty thousand. He clicked on his money market account and entered a thousand dollars and transferred it to this new account George set up. Zip. The BMP account received fifty-dollar deposits from twenty different banks.

He shook his head. The only thing he could figure was that George had emailed him the wrong account number. But if that were the case, what the hell was this account



and why was it set up to, basically, launder money? He reached for his phone and called George with no answer at the office, on his cell, or at home. By the time he called his residence, he was not just angry but a little shaken and left a pretty terse message asking him where the hell was he. He glanced at the clock: well past midnight. So, relegated to email, he responded to George's email sending him the account information. *What the fuck, George? Whose account is this?*

And just like that, a prior conversation split his mind like lightning. What was it his father had said? *When they begin the game look for the path.*

Four years prior, Robert Whitte had seemed preoccupied with getting his life in order. He was rarely at the office, often times taking long international trips. Mary Whitte had slipped from mild dementia into the final grip of oblivion. Jack knew that his parents' relationship had been strained from the very onset of the disease and when she no longer knew who either of them were, Robert had stopped going to visit her.

A month before Robert's disappearance, he and Jack spent a week at a house in Nassau, The Bahamas that the family had owned since the seventies. They fished, went to local bars and got drunk and Robert even womanized openly. Out on the fishing boat, they had long talks about life, in general, and Robert's prior hopes for Jack and, a reconciliation of sorts, with Jack's projection of inadequacy to his father's expectations: The same old bullshit that usually stands between father and son.

The last night of the vacation, they sat on a veranda as the horizon slipped from gold to purple to dark. The water gently lapped against the shore and they slowly drank their way into the darkness of the night. His father openly cried a few times; uneasiness

settled over Jack as, for the first time he realized that his parents were not really gods with dominion over his life but mere mortals whose time on earth was limited.

Yes, Jack was a full grown adult, entering his forties at the time, but with no other reference point after a life of dependency on his parents—they had been his crutch after the incident in Belize—he realized that he hadn't truly been in the shallow end of the pool after all. It's no different than when a father teaches a child to ride a bike; when the child realizes that Dad's hands are no longer guiding the bike, confidence slips and child and bike crash.

*Peddle harder, damn it.*

I'm trying, Dad.

*Try harder.*

Robert told Jack most of the story. Not all, because to do so would harm him more than do him good but the story had been fanciful and Jack had been drunk and the next morning, neither of them spoke about the story again.

So when the money somehow bypassed the new account and went directly into the Venezuelan account, he realized this was the path. George had led him to the path.

He heard what sounded like a poodle coughing and he turned to see a fully dressed Morgan standing in the doorway of his bedroom holding his cell phone in her left hand.

“If you want me to keep coming over, you need to change the ring tone of your phone. It's the same as my alarm clock.”

Whitte grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Whoever wants to speak to you, wants to urgently.”

Whitte took the phone and smiled. “You're dressed.”

“Excellent observation.” She pushed a strand of hair from her eyes. “I’ve an eight o’clock class. I need to get going anyway.”

Whitte looked down at his cell phone and it told him it was now five-thirty. Shit, he was supposed to be on a flight in less than two hours. He stood and gave her a long kiss. “Sorry,” he said again. “I’ll be back on Thursday. Diner?”

“We’ll have to see, now, won’t we?” She took the circular stairs down to the first floor of Whitte’s loft and then took the elevator back down to her apartment.

With her scent still lingering, he glanced at the phone and saw that Gator Lecoste, WO&G’s production manager, had been the one calling. Cajun born, Cajun bread.

“What da fuck, bossman. I been tryin’ to get a hold of ya all night long.”

“And why the hell would you do that? We have a blowout?”

“Na, nutting like dat. Dere’s a fella who wants ta meet with ya this mornin’. Hear ya were a talkin’ at da PE conference in Nassau. Say’s he’s gotta prospectus for us but dat we have ta move quick.”

Whitte cleared his mind as he walked into his bathroom to get showered and on the road. “Okay, what’s the play?”

“Cuba. The fella’s got an option from the Bahamian gov’ment to drill out from sum island in the north sector of an international zone but dat da Cubans are talkin’ width da Chinese to develop it and so we’s got ta move fast.”

Deciphering Cajun was getting easier for Whitte. “Why us?”

“Our slant hole tech.”

Whitte turned on his shower. “Okay, set it up. Just make sure he understands that

I've got a noon presentation.”

“Sure ding, bossman.”