

# The Floating Man

by William Crawford

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## CHAPTER 1

John Hill was coming home.

Turning off Interstate 95 South, he guided his Mercury Grand Marquis onto US 17 North. Up ahead, a familiar signpost loomed. Only twenty-five more miles to Beaufort, South Carolina.

*Home.*

He smiled at the thought.

A beautiful, sunny June afternoon. A new beginning.

*Home.*

Max Baker—his editor at the *Washington Post*, a big bear of a man sporting a bushy walrus-style mustache—had tried his best to persuade John to stay on, noting that he was well on his way to becoming a Washington institution. At thirty-two, John already had several major investigative pieces under his belt. In a few years he could be another Bob Woodward. But John would not be persuaded. The previous fall he had suffered a grievous loss: both his parents were killed in a car crash. Suddenly, all his career success, his achievements—none of that seemed to matter. It all seemed shallow and inconsequential.

John Hill was coming home.

His thoughts went to the Pulitzer Prize he shared with Sheila Jefferson, his investigative partner. Working together, they had uncovered a scheme in the defense department to rig contracts

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during the rebuilding of Iraq. In the aftermath, several high-ranking military officials were forced to resign.

Thinking of Sheila brought some sadness—another blow to his psyche. When Sheila quit the *Post* to join the staff of the National Security Council, it ended any chance for a romance, compounding the emptiness he felt in his life.

Sheila was an intimidating woman: a tall, statuesque brunette with a figure that was almost like the cartoon caricatures found in superhero comic books. Almost.

Those looks, coupled with a no-nonsense, standoffish exterior, did not make her many friends those first few months at the *Post*. The general opinion in the office was that Max had hired her for her looks. Men, with the exception of jerks like Ted Dody, now the *Post's* Paris bureau correspondent, were too intimidated to approach her. Women universally shunned her, perceiving her looks to be both a career and marital threat.

John was the first to see through her facade. Paired together for an investigative piece on waste and abuse in farm subsidy programs, he saw what Max had seen: a first rate investigative reporter with the instincts of a veteran. Behind that facade, John found a lonely woman trapped by her beauty, as if it were a disfiguring liability. Sheila, longing to fit in, to be one of the guys, became close to John, professionally; over the next two years the two of them worked as a team on several stories.

The hurt look on Sheila's face when he broke the news of his move back to South Carolina would forever be seared in his mind. John knew there was a mutual attraction between them, but Sheila was intent on climbing the rungs of the Washington power structure. He was not.

Sheila's job involved compiling intelligence reports into briefing papers for the head of the NSC, Henry Smith. As national security advisor to the president, he was one of the wise old men of Washington, having served in both Republican and Democratic administrations. John could not see a future for the two of them. An investigative reporter whose job was to ferret out government secrets, romantically involved with a staffer for the NSC, whose job was to protect those secrets—not going to happen.

And the simple truth of the matter? He was tired of the rat race. Tired of chasing down one big story after another.

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Looking in the rear-view mirror at the crow's feet forming around his eyes, he realized the physical and psychic toll stress was taking on his body. The excessive drinking of late didn't help matters much either.

John's solution was to move back to his old hometown, reconnect with the people he grew up with and lead a slower-paced life. His first job had been interning for James Campbell, editor of the Beaufort Sentinel. During high school and summer breaks from college, James showed John the ins and outs of small-town reporting. The great-great-grandson of the founder, and last surviving male heir of the Campbell name, James was a portly Southern gentleman of seventy with a head of wispy white hair that seemed to have just weathered a windstorm. John had always kept up with his mentor, who was like a father figure, calling him frequently. During one of those calls he learned that James had developed heart problems and was considering selling the Beaufort Sentinel. He saw a chance to break away from the rat race, and took it.

Taking a leave of absence from the *Post*, John made several trips to Beaufort to discuss the matter before he and James agreed on terms. James stipulated that he wanted a continuing role, something akin to Editor Emeritus, when physically able. John added a further proviso: James must stop in from time to time to provide insights into Beaufort society. This had delighted James. They sealed the deal with a drink on the front porch swing of James' home as the sun slowly set over Beaufort.

John smiled at the memory as he turned onto US 21, minutes away from the Sentinel.

John Hill was coming home.

## CHAPTER 2

James Campbell took a look around the office. He wanted to soak in his last few moments as Editor of the Sentinel before John arrived.

He went slowly down the stairs into the basement where old newspapers were archived in wooden camphorwood storage chests along the side and back walls. Sweating profusely, he chuckled to himself at the mess John had made. A week earlier, John had removed the papers from the chests for 1830 and 1831 to look up articles about President Jackson and the Indian Removal Act—one of John's pet projects.

James bent down to pick up the papers strewn across the floor and stopped dead in his tracks. He felt his heart flip into what his doctor would later call a supraventricular tachycardia heart rhythm. Collapsing to the floor, James clutched his chest as his heart pounded furiously. He waited for the dangerous rhythm to stop, but instead, it speeded up. As it reached two hundred beats per minute he felt a fear he had never felt before—the fear of dying. Panic, mixed with copious amounts of sweat, broke out all over James Campbell's body.

*Got to get up the stairs, reach the phone . . . don't want to die in the basement.*

Clutching his chest, afraid his heart was going to explode,

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James turned onto his side. Slowly, in snakelike fashion, he slithered towards the stairs, not moving at anything faster than a snail's pace for fear of causing his heart to jump into an even more dangerous and faster rhythm. He reached the stairs. It seemed like an eternity. In reality, only a couple minutes had passed.

James raised his right arm and reached for the banister that seemed to float in front of him like a lifeline tossed from the deck of a ship. He grabbed hold. Slowly, he raised himself up. His heart raced faster. He stood for a minute . . . not moving . . . expecting the worst . . . but nothing happened. He lifted his right leg onto the bottom step. When he lifted his left leg, it happened—his heart stopped with a huge thump. It felt as if someone had punched him in the chest, right over his heart muscle. The dangerous racing tachycardia was suddenly broken; his heart snapped back into a normal rhythm. But the suddenness startled James. As he lowered his left leg it landed on the edge of the step and slipped off.

All James' weight shifted to his left side. In his panicked condition he lost grasp of the banister and fell backwards, spinning counterclockwise. His head struck a large filing cabinet, creating a shallow inch-long gash just above and behind his left temple, knocking him unconscious. He fell onto a three-foot stack of newspapers that cushioned his fall and created a makeshift compress for his wound.

\* \* \*

John pulled up in front of the Sentinel and looked up at the two-hundred-year-old red brick building he was now the proud owner of. He went inside to look for James before unloading his worldly possessions from the small U-Haul. Calling out, he received no response.

*That's strange.*

James knew he would be arriving this afternoon. He looked around the office and noticed a cup of coffee on the editor's desk. He went over and felt it.

*Still warm.*

Beginning to get a little worried, John shouted out James' name, over and over. He searched the front and back living quarters.

No James.

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He searched the upstairs. Still no James.

John went downstairs to the basement. And there, lying on newspapers scattered across the floor, he found him. Rushing to his side, John noticed blood seeping from a gash in James' head. He leaned over and called to him but got no response. He pressed a hand to James' chest, feeling for a heartbeat, but could feel none. He ran back upstairs and dialed 911. After his frantic explanation, the operator dispatched paramedics and instructed John in the application of CPR. He ran back down the stairs and immediately started chest compressions. After thirty compressions he checked for breathing: finding none, he bent down to give James mouth-to-mouth breaths.

As John began mouth-to-mouth breathing, James' eyes opened up.

"I never expected you to take advantage of an old man this way."

"I thought you were dead," John said, jumping up in shock.

"That kind of makes it even sicker, don't you think?"

James put his hand to his head. John helped him to a sitting position against the filing cabinet.

"Stay right there, James. Don't try to get up, I called the paramedics. They should be here any second."

"I didn't have a heart attack. I had a heart arrhythmia and fell, hitting my head."

"James, you didn't have a heartbeat."

"That's because you couldn't feel it through my Rubenesque figure."

Attempting to get up, James fell back to a sitting position as paramedics arrived. Within minutes he was placed on a stretcher and loaded into the ambulance for the short ride to Beaufort Memorial.

## CHAPTER 3

It was nearly seven in the evening before the doctor would let John in to see James. He was sitting up in bed watching an old movie starring Humphrey Bogart.

“How many times have you watched that movie?”

“At least two hundred. I know all the lines by heart. If they ever film a remake, I’ve got the Casper Gutman character sewed up.”

“I’m sure you do,” John said, pulling up a chair to James’ bedside. “So tell me, what did the doctors say?”

“Mild heart attack. Probably from the shock of seeing you on top of me,” James said with a pretend scowl. “My doctor says I was lucky I didn’t have a stroke, my blood was frothing around like a washing machine. They want to do something called an RF ablation. Zap some cells on my heart that cause the arrhythmias.” James hit the mute button on the remote. “Going to snake some thin wires through my groin and neck arteries first thing in the morning. A minor procedure. The doctor says he’s also going to clear a small blockage, maybe put in a stent while they’re at it. Said I’ll be back home in a couple days. Sooner, if I wasn’t so fat and old.”

“You need anything? Maybe something to read? Newspaper, magazine, book?”

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“Get me the latest issue of Cosmo, if you would.”

“Really? Cosmo?” John looked a bit amused.

“Positively,” James said, beaming. “I like to keep up with what the women of today are thinking.”

“I’ll get you a health and fitness magazine.”

James looked at John sourly.

They talked for a while about the Beaufort Sentinel and plans for smuggling James his beloved scotch and water. After a half hour, John could see that the day’s events had taken a lot out of his friend. Rising out of his chair he told James to get some rest, and squeezed his shoulder before turning to leave.

“One more thing, John . . . uh . . . if you would. I know it’s not my paper anymore.”

“What?” John interrupted gently.

“Could you *please* clean up that mess in the basement? You know how anal I am.”

“Bye,” John said with a laugh and shake of his head.

As John reached the door, James, in a surprisingly strong voice said, “*Wait.*”

He turned and looked back at his mentor.

“Thanks for today,” James said.

John blew him a kiss and slowly closed the door behind him.

“By gad, sir, you never cease to amaze me with your antics.” In perfect mimicry of Sydney Greenstreet’s fictional Casper Gutman, James’ words followed John through the closing door.

## CHAPTER 4

Thirty-two-year-old John Hill sat on a stack of old newspapers, breathing in the smell of crumbling bricks in the musty basement of the Sentinel. The moldering decay made him think of James' physical decay. Sitting amidst the scattered remains of history from so long ago reminded John of how transient life was.

*Once we're gone, we're all just history. That's if we've done something with our lives that history will take note of.*

This last thought made John realize that maybe coming home was an admission of defeat rather than reconnecting with the people he loved. He thought of James, lying there in a pool of blood. Turning his attention to cleaning up the mess and cleansing his mind of negative thoughts, he picked up the bloodstained newspaper which had so recently served as a pillow for James' head. The date was Friday, June 4, 1830.

### ***Indian Removal Act - Savages offered new territories west of Mississippi!***

*Federal Government to negotiate with Indians to voluntarily move to lands west of the Mississippi river. President Jackson says the Act will "separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites and enable them to pursue happiness in their own way and under their own crude institutions."*

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### *The Act*

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, that it shall and may be lawful for the President of the United States to cause so much of any territory belonging to the United States, west of the river Mississippi, not included in any state or organized territory, and to which the Indian title has been extinguished, as he may judge necessary, to be divided into a suitable number of districts, for the reception of such tribes or nations of Indians as may choose to exchange the lands where they now reside, and remove there; and to cause each of said districts to be so described by natural or artificial marks, as to be easily distinguished from every other.*

*Our beloved President went on to address those presently assembled at the signing:*

*“And is it supposed that the wandering savage has a stronger attachment to his home than the settled, civilized Christian? Is it more afflicting to him to leave the graves of his fathers than it is to our brothers and children? Rightly considered, the policy of the General Government toward the red man is not only liberal, but generous. He is unwilling to submit to the laws of the States and mingle with their population. To save him from this alternative, or perhaps utter annihilation, the General Government kindly offers him a new home, and proposes to pay the whole expense of his removal and settlement.”*

Turning the pages of the bloodstained newspaper, John came across an article about a Mr. Owens: stabbed in a fight over the honor of his wife by one Mr. Andrews. It seems that an attending doctor proclaimed for all to hear that Mr. Owens wounds were not life threatening, whereupon Mr. Owens promptly expired. Mr. Andrews was later found not guilty of murder, based upon the testimony of all present that the good doctor had proclaimed Mr. Owens wounds to be of the non-lethal variety.

Delving further into the old newspaper, John found a curious article with the following headline:

***Floating Man from France to perform aerial stunts this  
Saturday***

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*Henri Richaud, the amazing Floating Man, will be demonstrating his antigravity device in Union Square this Saturday, June 5, at 1:00 p.m. Mr. Richaud amazed the crowd in Savannah last week by floating above their heads and performing several passes over the assembled throngs, who gazed in awe and some terror. The device that Mr. Richaud has invented appears to work by some sort of electrical means, utilizing the repellant force of gravity. In an interview with the Southern Times, Mr. Richaud, who has been performing along the Eastern Seaboard of our great country, said he hopes to cap off his summer tour by performing for President Andrew Jackson on the lawn of the White House. Mr. Richaud, who served in the armies of Napoleon, and was a colleague of the late great French scientist, Pierre-Simon Laplace, hopes one day to make a conveyance capable of transporting several passengers. The Honorable Pastor Leonard Pearson fears that this machine, which in his words, "defies the laws of nature and man," is perhaps the result of a collaboration between Mr. Richaud and evil forces. Pastor Pearson does not discount the possibility of witchcraft being involved, though his is a minority opinion in the community.*

John reread the article several times. It had to be some kind of joke. Did James' ancestor, Robert Campbell, enjoy playing practical jokes on his readers? The notion seemed absurd. John began looking through the newspapers scattered around him for the Friday, June 11, 1830 edition of the weekly Beaufort Sentinel. That edition would undoubtedly have a lengthy article on Henri Richaud's performance in Beaufort.

After nearly an hour of looking through several stacks of newspapers, John gave up and went upstairs—showered, and brewed a pot of coffee.

Sitting at the kitchen table in the back of the Sentinel—which doubled as his home—doubts again seeped back into John's mind about his decision to return.

*Home. Am I home? Or am I just running away?*

John had always believed that a person's life had meaning. Now he was not so sure. Was he a man without purpose, without love? At the exact instant he thought those negative thoughts, a sunbeam streamed in through the kitchen window and splayed across the table.

Looking at the sunbeam, John was suddenly transfixed by one lonely speck of dust, dancing as if in a spotlight. As he stared, this

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one solitary mote of dust, became, for a moment, suspended in the sunbeam. A crazy irrational thought, one that would shake John to his core and bring him back to some sort of grounded reality entered his brain. This speck of dust was the soul of Henri Richaud trying to communicate with him. As if on cue, the speck of dust moved horizontally across the sunbeam. Reaching the edge, it reversed direction, directly back in front of John's eyes. At that moment, the speck of dust became Henri Richaud, the Floating Man, racing high across a sun-drenched field over the throngs assembled below. As if by magic, John looked down and noticed a mass of dust motes nearer the surface of the table. In his mind the assembled masses watched in awe.

Looking back at the dust mote soul of Henri Richaud floating before him, he watched in amazement as it floated towards his face. When it was mere inches in front of his eyes it ascended upward, disappearing above the sunbeam.

An instant later a cloud moved across the sun, extinguishing the sunbeam and completing the transformation of John Hill. If one speck of dust out of the trillions and trillions of specks of dust could hold such purpose and meaning, surely he could find some meaning in his life.

At that moment John Hill silently made a vow.

*Henri Richaud, whoever you are, I will find you. I will dedicate my life to finding your story and bringing it to the world. I make this promise to you and to myself.*

## CHAPTER 5

*Ecole Militaire School, Paris, France, 1785*

Professor Pierre-Simon Laplace leaned back in his chair. The thirty-six-year-old mathematician and astronomer, world renowned for his mathematical formulas explaining the stability of the solar system, relaxes after a full day of classes.

Elected to the French Academy of Sciences at the age of twenty-four after being rejected the previous two years, may explain why Laplace is imperious with his colleagues—for whom with but a few exceptions, he has nothing but disdain. Professor Laplace is generous however, with students under his tutelage: frequently engaging them, socially and intellectually.

Sitting comfortably across from him today are two of his most prized pupils: Napoleone (as he was known before he dropped the ‘e’ at the end) and Henri Richaud, son of a wealthy vineyard owner from the port city of Bordeaux, in the southwest of France.

In his own mind (and perhaps correctly) Pierre-Simon Laplace is the most brilliant scientist of his time, and never ceases to remind others of this fact.

“Did you know I am referred to as the Newton of France?”

“I was not aware of that, Professor. Were you, Napoleone?” Henri looked over to his friend, the future Emperor of France with

a smirk.

“I cannot say with certainty that I have heard the phrase either.”

“Oh, come come boys, I tell you every day. In fact, it is more than a little demeaning to be known as the Sir Isaac Newton of France, when I have more knowledge of the universe than he ever had. He should be known as the Laplace of England, no?”

“That may be true, sir. But then again, Newton does have the misfortune of being dead now for almost sixty years. And I *believe* he remains dead to this day.” Fifteen-year-old Henri Richaud leaned back to his left, stretched out his legs and languorously threw his right arm over the back of his chair. He looked over at Napoleone, anticipating an amusing retort, and was not disappointed.

“Professor, if it assuages your hurt feelings a little, I believe I can safely say that one day Henri will be known as the Alessandro Volta of France.”

“It would assuage my feelings more, my dear Napoleone, if he were known as the Luigi Galvani of France,” Laplace said in a mocking Italian accent while looking intensely into Henri’s eyes.

Henri, a bit unnerved by the Professor’s intense stare, looked down.

“You do not think highly of Galvani’s theory of electrical fluid in animal tissue, Professor?”

“Henri, I do not think that making dead frog’s legs jump by connecting them to metal strips a profound discovery. That is equivalent to the first woman who chopped off the head of a chicken and watched it run around the barnyard. You two are my brightest pupils. But Henri, I believe your work on bioelectrical energy will eventually lead you to a dead end.” Professor Laplace nodded at Napoleone and continued: “Napoleone is right. Better to be known as the Volta of France. Right now he is working on electrical current, and batteries which will one day power marvelous new devices.”

“But Professor, why not study both in parallel? Animate and human electrical energy fields along with inanimate electrical energy fields. Surely all living things are subject to the same forces of gravitational attraction and magnetism as are the planets of the solar system. We all exert a physical effect, no matter how minutely, with everything around us.”

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“Henri, your point is well taken. But I am afraid I am busy at the present time, fixing the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn, along with proving the stability of the Solar System to my esteemed members of the academy. Who, I might add, are too insufficient to understand my explanations without having it spelled out to them mathematically, like some dumb child. And Henri . . . once I have done that, and as soon as I am done fixing the speed and motion of the moon, I will work with you on your unified theory of the effect of animate and inanimate objects on the magnetic field. Should take me no more than a week. In the meantime, why don’t you two work on proving mathematically why animate objects such as yourselves tend to wobble and tilt on their axis, instead of orbiting smoothly through their course of studies here at Ecole.”

\* \* \*

Back in their living quarters the setting sun sent shards of light through the window. Napoleone sat on a chair, looking over at Henri, who lay on his bed trying to catch the last glimmers of sunlight on the book he was reading. The book, *Dangerous Liaisons*, published less than three years earlier, had caused quite a stir in France. Through a series of fictional letters, it told the tale of two ex-lovers and rivals: the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmon; following them as they used sex to manipulate and exact revenge on those around them. Written by Choderlos de Laclos, a captain in the engineering section of the French army, it was an immediate sensation, selling over a thousand copies in the first month of publication. It was said to be a favorite of Queen Marie Antoinette.

“Henri, what are you reading?”

“*Dangerous Liaisons*, by Laclos.”

“Ah, Laclos, he is a good military man. An artillery expert, graduated from the Ecole Royale D’artillerie de La Fere. I will probably study under him one day. A bit of a decadent pervert, if his writing is any indication.”

Henri, still reading, casually said to his friend, “Why my dear Napoleone, you do not believe all is fair game when it comes to love and war?”

For some reason this remark seemed to strike a nerve in Napoleone. His voice rose in pitch. “Where is the honor in

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everyone deceiving and provoking jealousy in each other? Using sex as revenge instead of remaining virtuous is not my idea of the way human society should behave. It is why our aristocracy is so despised. There is no honor. Our whole society is rotting from within, and everyone seems to be content on drinking, partying, and dancing their lives away.”

Putting his book down, Henri turned onto his side and propped his head up with his hand. “I could not agree with you more. And our beloved king better be careful. If he raises taxes on the poor any higher, there will be nothing left for them to do, but to die or revolt. And if you are going to starve to death, you might as well go out with a bang. An admittedly different type of bang than our aristocratic friends are going out with. And of course, using sex as a weapon will not work if the masses revolt. But then again, I suppose you have to work with what you have. And Laclos does make for some very enjoyable reading.”

Napoleone shook his head and grinned.

“I can see that it does, my dear friend. Go play with your pistol and I will stick with my artillery.”

Henri smiled back mischievously.

“Napoleone, must you always have to have the bigger explosions?”

“It makes up for my lack of aim.”

A cloud suddenly crossed Napoleone’s face. He turned serious and changed the subject.

“Tell me something, Henri. Why is it that when I came to Ecole, you were the only one that did not make fun of my Corsican accent? Everyone picked on me but you. And you certainly did not have to make my fight yours. Why?”

Henri raised himself to a sitting position and faced his good friend. He looked down for a few moments to gather his thoughts before looking back up.

“I guess it must have seemed strange to you. It certainly seemed strange to me. I had never seen you before in my life, but there you were, in the courtyard of Ecole with your bags at your feet, surrounded by jeering students. I heard the commotion, so being a curious fellow, I walked over to see what all the fuss was about.”

“I was about to get my ass kicked, that was what all the fuss

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was about! And then you came and did a most remarkable thing.”

“A brilliant thing,” Henri added.

“In hindsight, I suppose you are right. But at the time, it did not seem to me to be so brilliant.”

“You did not think it brilliant the way I walked right up to you, telling those other boys to get out of my way?”

“Admittedly, it was brilliant the way you took charge and said, ‘Out of my way. Leave this one to me. I know how to handle this one.’ The way you took command of the situation. That part I have no problem with. Nor the part where you winked at me, letting me in on whatever you were planning, and then grabbing me by the collar. Up to that point, Henri, your plan was brilliant.”

“And whispering into your ear? Was that not also brilliant?”

“That was brilliant too. Even what you whispered into my ear, while I would not characterize it as brilliant, was at least satisfactory to me.”

“So we are quibbling then with the execution of the plan?”

“Yes! Yes, exactly. Your strategy was perfect. The execution? Not so much.”

“Well it was the first time I had ever punched anyone in the face.”

Both boys looked at each other and broke out laughing.

Henri continued: “You know, if I had met you earlier we might have had time to practice. But Napoleone, you played your part most convincingly. I loved the way you rolled your eyes back into your head, pretending to be knocked out.”

Napoleone, still laughing, managed to say, “I *was* knocked out, dammit!”

At that moment, Henri looked stone-faced at Napoleone. Softly, with some regret, and in a most sincere tone of voice, he said, “Napoleone, I am so sorry. I always thought you were acting. It pains me to realize that you missed out on the most brilliant aspect of my plan.”

“I will, of course, accept your apology for knocking me out, although I have the strange suspicion that you are sorrier for my not watching the finale of your performance, of which, I am sure, you will presently fill me in on.”

Napoleone made a grand sweeping gesture with his hand.

“Please, if you will, Henri, on with the finale of your most

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brilliant plan.”

“Seems like a letdown in retrospect, knowing that you were not witness to it. I merely told your tormentors that if anyone had a problem with this Corsican, they were to see me. I alone would deal with you. And if they did not, they would get what I gave to you. Then I told them all to get out of my sight because my thirst for blood was not yet assuaged.”

“You *actually* said your thirst for blood was not yet assuaged?”

“Probably not. But something to that effect.”

“So Henri, you still have not told me why you would involve yourself in my difficulties. Why?”

“This is going to sound strange to you, and I hesitate to tell you, for fear that you might misinterpret what I am about to say. Then again, I do not know if I have an interpretation to explain it either, but here goes. When I saw you standing there with your bags at your feet, surrounded by that callous uncaring mob, I saw my mother standing there.”

“I am so sorry for your mother, Henri.”

“Thank you, Napoleone, for your little joke, but no, mother did not look like you. It’s just that the first memory I have of my mother is her carrying a sack of groceries at the market. My mother has a palsied leg which makes walking very difficult. Each step for her was and is very painful to watch. After taking a step, she would set down her sack of groceries. All the villagers were milling around, much like the boys circling you on your first day. I watched my mother move, step by step, struggling to stay upright and carry that heavily laden sack. Nobody would help her, but everyone stared as she slowly made her way down the market street. Then out of nowhere, I saw my dad running up to her. When he got to her side he stopped and hugged her for a very long time. He leaned into her, kissed her gently, and relieved her of her sack. She laid her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her, helping her down the street. With my dad by her side she appeared to walk normally, as if her palsied leg had magically healed. That’s it. I guess that is why I helped you. I love you like my dad loves my mother.”

“More like a brother, perhaps?” Napoleone looked at Henri; he averted his eyes and looked down at his feet.

“Yes, I suppose, more like a brother. Of course.”

“And that is why you helped to rid me of my Corsican accent?”

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“I suppose so. Tried to anyway. I could not help my mother. As a small child I prayed every day for God to heal her. But apparently he has more important things to do, and leaves us to fend for ourselves.”

“Henri? Maybe God brought us together. Maybe God has a plan for the both of us. We just cannot see it at the moment.”

“Perhaps.” Looking up with a slight smile, Henri continued; “But Professor Laplace does not believe in God.”

“No, Henri, he believes in God. He believes he is God.”

## CHAPTER 6

In the basement of the old eighteenth-century building, home to the weekly Beaufort Sentinel since its inception in 1828, John continued his search for the elusive Friday, June 11, 1830 edition. He was puzzled. Robert Campbell, the original editor of the Sentinel until his death in 1886 at the age of eighty, was meticulous in archiving his old editions—a tradition that his son, Robert Jr. did not carry on.

Each year's editions were stored in virtually identical, golden-brown camphorwood chests, adorned with brass corners and locking hasps, the year stamped on each brass faceplate. Native to China, Indochina, Japan, and Australia; camphorwood chests were widely used by seamen of the nineteenth century. The wood gave off a pleasing scent which repelled insects and moths, making them excellent for storage. The chests were chronologically stacked on shelves that lined the side and back walls of the Sentinel.

James, especially proud of his great-great-grandfather's attention to preservation, renewed the tradition of archiving each year's editions in camphorwood storage chests when he took over the helm in 1970.

When he first showed John the newspapers from his forbear's 1828 storage chest, John had been amazed at their remarkable condition. This was due to the type of paper the early newspapers

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were printed on. Up until the late 1870s, the Beaufort Sentinel was printed using rag linen, as were most newspapers of the era. James explained that rag-linen paper was actually made from a mash of boiled down clothing. The paper contained no acid or wood pulp, making it much more stable than later editions from the 1870s. That, along with storage in the camphorwood chests, explained their remarkable condition.

Given the elaborate storage and archiving system, John was mystified as to why he could not find the next few editions of the Sentinel following the one on Henri Richaud's flight—the one that James' head had so fortunately landed on.

A week prior to James' accident, John had removed the papers from the 1830 camphorwood chest. He had been doing research for a historical piece on the forced removal of Indian tribes from the early colonial states, culminating in the long march of the Cherokee nation from their homes in the southeastern United States to Oklahoma. The forced march of the Indian peoples to Oklahoma, known as the Trail of Tears, resulted in the death of anywhere from eighteen hundred to four thousand Cherokee out of a total population of approximately seventeen thousand.

As John restarted the search for the missing edition, the initial euphoria he felt upon discovering the news of a man floating above throngs of people, dissipated. Doubts about the significance of the event crept into his mind. Unable to find any additional information in the archives, John began to feel that maybe Henri Richaud was just one of a handful of early hot air balloonists.

A quick Google of hot air ballooning revealed that many of the first balloonists were indeed French. Perhaps it was not just coincidence that Henri Richaud was also French. The first recorded flight of a hot air balloon occurred over Paris on November 21, 1783. On that date, the Montgolfier brothers built and flew a balloon that reached a height of several hundred feet. Only a few days later on December 1, 1783 a hydrogen filled balloon piloted by Professor Jacques Charles and Nicholas Louis Robert flew almost two thousand feet over Paris: staying aloft for over two hours before landing in a small town twenty-five miles away. A French balloonist floating over Union Square in Beaufort, South Carolina, certainly would have been an amazing sight. And one not likely seen before by the residents.

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But there were still those missing editions of the Sentinel.

John's mind raced.

*Wouldn't an editor of a paper know about hot air or gas balloons even if he had never seen one? Surely, someone who would write a lead article on the Indian Removal Act as Robert Campbell had done would also keep up with the latest scientific developments. And balloons had been invented almost fifty years earlier.*

John momentarily vanquished his self-doubts. In earnest, he began a systematic search through several years of the Sentinel.

The preceding two years of the Sentinel were complete, but the 1830 editions beginning with June 11 were incomplete. There was a missing gap for the period of June 11 through September 17. The one other missing paper was the Friday, New Years Eve edition.

John decided to go through the 1831 and 1832 storage chests. In the 1831 chest he found two installments missing, and one in the 1832 chest. Curiously, in both years there was a missing edition in June, approximating the June 5, 1830 anniversary of the Floating Man's appearance in Beaufort. The June 3, 1831 and June 8, 1832 editions, along with the December 30, 1831 edition were missing.

John put all the facts together. First, there were the missing editions in 1830 corresponding with the summer tour of Henri Richaud, aka the Floating Man. Second, the editions that would have celebrated the anniversary of the events of June 5, 1830 were missing in the 1831 and 1832 editions. And third, the end of the year edition of the paper was missing in both the 1830 and 1831 editions. Putting it all together, John came to the conclusion that something indeed remarkable had happened in the summer of 1830.

John played devil's advocate one more time as doubts again crept back into his mind. Perhaps Robert Campbell had removed editions of the Sentinel that referred to the event in order to write a book of his memoirs. Hot air and gas balloons were still in their infancy and this would have certainly been a significant event in his life. But something in John's gut told him that there was more to the story than a simple hot air balloon over the square. John reread the original story from the June 4, 1830 edition.

After going over the article line by line, John became convinced that by 1830 a hot air balloon could not be mistaken for a device that in the words of the editor, "appears to work by some sort of electrical means, utilizing the repellent force of gravity." This

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was a once in a century story of great historical significance—of this he was positive. One that would require all his investigative talents. From his years at the *Washington Post*, John was used to tracking down witnesses on big stories; but in this case, all his witnesses were dead.

## CHAPTER 7

It was late in the day when John finished working up a plan of action for investigating what he labeled, “The Case of the Mysterious Henri Richaud aka The Floating Man.” After listing what he knew, what leads to follow, etc., he relaxed for the first time that day, settling into his vintage, leather club chair with a whiskey on the rocks. Both whiskey and chair were nicely aged. John took a sip and gazed out the large picture window of his office, watching the sun slowly lower its gaze on the residents of Beaufort. He was alone with his thoughts for several minutes when the back door opened and closed. He heard a tinkling of ice cubes in a glass, water running for a few seconds, and then the creaking of old oak floorboards as footsteps came towards him from behind.

“You’re late tonight.” John did not turn as James settled into the matching leather chair next to him, plunking down his usual scotch and water on the cocktail table between them.

“You know, Thelma used to love sitting on the porch, watching the sunset.” James, a widower, had lost his beloved wife a year earlier to lung cancer. “I would of course join her on the swing chair. Did that every day in the summer, rain or shine, for almost thirty years.”

“Sounds beautiful. Like a Norman Rockwell painting.” John raised his glass, clinked James’ glass and made a toast: “Here is to

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Thelma, God rest her soul.”

“God rest her soul,” James said, almost in unison.

“I’m sorry, my friend. Our little Saturday evenings must pale in comparison.”

“Are you *kidding* me? I hated it. Every day getting attacked by bugs. Never seemed to bother Thelma, but they were all over me. Something in my sweat glands. I looked it up once. Something called carbolic or carboxylic acids. Can’t remember exactly, but I have it in prodigious quantities. I think that’s why Thelma always had me join her on the porch.”

“To keep the skeeters away from her.”

“Exactly.” James pulled out a bag of broken-up pieces of dark chocolate. “Want some?”

“No thanks, I’m good,” John said, raising his glass to take another sip.

“You know, it’s lucky for you I didn’t find out about the beneficial effects of dark chocolate on the arteries and heart before I sold you the paper.”

“Does the doctor know you’re eating that stuff?”

“They don’t know everything. I’ve been out less than a week and already I feel twenty years younger.” He took another sip of scotch and water. “Besides, I’m following doctor’s orders as we speak. A drink or two helps protect the heart.”

“Eating chocolate and drinking scotch sounds like a pretty brutal health regimen to follow.”

“I’ll survive. We all have to make some sacrifices,” James said, turning to face John. “And speaking of sacrifices, thanks for cleaning up that bloody mess in the basement.”

“Funny thing about that bloody mess,” John said, turning serious. “You literally landed on the story of a lifetime.”

“How so?” James said, looking a bit confused.

John related the discovery of the Floating Man article and the missing editions of the Beaufort Sentinel. When he finished, he got up and brought his friend the June 4, 1830 edition of the Sentinel.

James read the article. He put the paper down and looked quizzically at his friend.

“So what do you plan on doing next?”

“First, I plan on refilling our drinks.” John got up and grabbed James’ raised glass.

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“Easy on the Scotch. Doctor’s orders.”

Returning with drinks in hand, John settled back down and gazed out at the last few rays of sunlight.

“Second, I’ll see if I can track down the interview the *Southern Times* did with Henri Richaud. Savannah was mentioned in the article as a place where Richaud performed the week previous to coming to Beaufort. And since he was traveling up the Eastern Seaboard he would have undoubtedly stopped in Charleston. So it makes sense to research some old archived papers from around that time. I guess I should also do some research on this French scientist, Laplace, who apparently was a colleague of Henri Richaud’s. Hopefully there will be some record of his meeting Andrew Jackson . . . if his tour made it to Washington. I’m still close with Max Baker, the editor of the Washington Post. And an investigative reporter I did some articles with, Sheila Jefferson, now works for the NSC. I know she’s busy, being on the staff of the National Security Council, but I’m sure she could pull a few strings and get someone at the National Archives to help me with some research.”

“You won a Pulitzer Prize with her, didn’t you?”

“Yep, sure did.”

“And if I remember correctly, she’s very hot as your generation puts it so crassly?”

“Correct on both counts. Beauty and generational colloquialisms. So tell me, James, is there anything I’ve missed as far as my investigative plans are concerned?”

“Seems from your perspective you have everything covered. But if it was me doing the research, I would first look at the missing editions that are probably stored in my basement along with the other editions my great-great-grandfather archived in the house.”

“Excuse me?” John looked like he had just been hit in the head with a brick.

“My forebear was very anal, but also quite advanced for his time. Of course he would have a backup copy, just like we have today. His version of a flash drive was identical camphorwood storage chests.”

\* \* \*

“Well that’s the strangest thing. This certainly is turning out to

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be quite a mystery, John.”

They had gone through the 1830–1832 camphorwood chests stored in the basement of the ancestral Campbell family home and came up empty. Every edition missing in the archives back at the Sentinel was also missing from the chests stored in James Campbell’s home. John was too stunned to say anything.

“There’s a reason for this,” James said. “An explanation. We just have to find out what it is. It’s just part of the puzzle. My grandfather was too meticulous. In fact, I guarantee you that if we go through every other chest we will not find any other missing editions of the paper. And if there is one here or there, it’s probably related to this Henri Richaud. But why? John, this is such fun. You must let me join you in this quest.”

James put an arm around his crestfallen friend, continuing to babble as they walked back upstairs. “You wouldn’t want such a mystery to be solved immediately, would you? What satisfaction would there be in that? C’mon, John. It’s like the search for the Maltese Falcon. I’m Casper Gutman, the Sydney Greenstreet character to your Sam Spade. Does it matter if we have to spend more time searching for our little bird? It’s only an expense of time and money.” Chuckling, James added, “Your money, to be precise.”

James opened the door for John to leave.

“I don’t mind a reasonable amount of trouble, but didn’t your Gutman character spend seventeen years looking for the Falcon, with no result?” John said, standing on the porch.

“Well, well now, what’s this?” James replied in his Casper Gutman voice.

“Did you memorize *every* line from the movie?”

“Positively! Oh, and John, happy anniversary.”

Looking confused, John asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Today is the fifth of June. The anniversary of Henri Richaud floating over Beaufort.”

John stared for a few moments at the closing door before turning to leave. His thoughts on a man and events nearly two centuries old.

## CHAPTER 8

*Midnight, Paris, France, June 19, 1792*

Paris on the eve of the third anniversary of the Oath of the Tennis Court was on fire with rumors of a march to Tuileries Palace and a possible assassination of King Louis XVI. It had been almost three years to the day since deputies of the Third Estate, representing commoners, declared themselves the National Assembly of France in defiance of King Louis XVI. In the following days, a majority of the clerics of the First Estate along with a handful of nobles of the Second Estate joined the commoners.

On June 20, 1789, after being refused admittance to their assigned assembly hall, the deputies of the Third Estate moved to a nearby tennis court and unanimously adopted an oath that asserted sovereignty resided in the people themselves, not with the king. The 577 members agreed to stay assembled until a constitution was written and adopted. One week later, King Louis XVI capitulated and summoned representatives of all the Estates for the purpose of writing a constitution. In the following weeks, as he saw his support crumble, King Louis XVI ordered the remaining Clergy and Nobility to join the Third Estate.

But if the king thought these actions would quell the

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revolutionary ardor rampant across France, he was rudely reminded otherwise less than a month later. On July 14, one thousand Parisians stormed the royal fortress prison known as the Bastille, looking to free those imprisoned by King Louis XVI. Bernard-Rene De Launay, Governor of the Bastille, hoping to avoid a bloodbath, surrendered to the assembled mob on the condition that he and his men would be spared harm. De Launay was escorted under protection of the leader of the insurrection to the Hotel de Ville. Unfortunately for de Launay, the crowd had other ideas. A heated argument over his fate ensued at the steps of the Hotel de Ville. Governor De Launay soon sealed it.

After being insulted by a man called Desnot, he shouted, "Enough! Let me die!" De Launay then kicked the man in the groin and was repeatedly stabbed and shot. He suffered his final ignominy at the hands of a Parisian butcher, who cut off his head and placed it on a wooden pike to be carried aloft through the streets of Paris.

Now, three years later, in the fateful summer of 1792, Napoleone and his friend, Henri Richaud, had a ringside seat on events that would ultimately lead to the overthrow of the monarchy and the execution of King Louis XVI. In a small second floor Paris apartment overlooking the public square of the king's Tuileries Palace they reminisced about old times and the amazing events that had rocked France the past few years.

Napoleone regaled Henri with his exploits on the island of Corsica. After failing in an attempt to seize the Citadel of Ajaccio (his hometown) from the French garrison stationed there, he narrowly escaped back to France where he found he was listed as absent without leave. He then spent the next few weeks politicking legislators to get reinstated as an officer in the French army.

"So let me see if I understand you," Henri said, leaning forward in his chair. "You become lieutenant colonel in a battalion of the Corsican Volunteers and try to seize the French citadel at Ajaccio. You stir up the whole island against you and flee back to Paris where you are absent without leave from the army, and get reinstated. After attacking French troops."

"And I got promoted to captain," Napoleone grinned.

"I don't understand how that happens," Henri said, shaking his head.

"It's all a game of politics. Everything has been screwed up

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here the last few years; you just have to know who is calling the shots, day-by-day. I spent more time at the Legislative Assembly than I did at the officers' quarters."

"And more time on leave than on duty," Henri replied.

"They value my expertise as an artillery theoretician." Napoleone smiled and leaned back in his chair. "And what about you, Henri? What have you and Professor Laplace been up to?"

"I've been helping him with the mathematical approach to his laws of universal gravitation. Setting up equations to explain the motions of the centers of gravity of the various bodies in the solar system. But I am more excited about electromagnetic force. I believe that it is possible to use the attractive and repellant force of electromagnetic fields along with centrifugal force to levitate an object. After all, aren't the planets, in reality, levitating?"

"So no more jumping frog's legs?" Napoleone said in a jab at his old classmate.

"No, Professor Laplace was right about Galvani. Volta's line of research on electrical batteries is much more promising in the field of electromagnetic levitation."

"Why not work on refining hot air balloons? Monsieur Montgolfier flew over Paris almost ten years ago. And others since have done the same," Napoleone replied.

"Yes, yes, I was there! I saw the Montgolfier brothers' balloon take off. But when it landed over five miles away the pilots had to walk back. I want to be able to control where I am going."

"But can you control gravity?" Napoleone asked earnestly.

"I believe you can, by reducing and increasing magnetic fields through centrifugal force."

"And what if you cannot?"

"Well . . . then I guess I will just have to put a horse aboard my balloon so I won't have to walk back," Henri said, laughing at his own joke.

Napoleone shook his head. "Still the same old Henri. You will never change."

"And you, my friend, are still the same old Napoleone. Always out looking for a fight, regardless of the side. You hate us French, but yet you fight for us . . . sometimes."

"Speaking of fights, have you heard what is going to happen tomorrow?"

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“I have heard rumors.”

“They are more than rumors, Henri. According to my contacts, the Girondists are going to stage a demonstration at the Assembly. Afterwards, they plan to march on the palace to protest the removal of their cabinet ministers and overturn the king’s veto of their decrees. And Santerre has been plotting for the past few weeks and plans to lead his people in a big demonstration.”

“If I were the king, I would abdicate and leave Paris.”

“He can’t, Henri. He tried leaving France a year ago to the day and was dragged back to Paris. He is for all intents and purposes under house arrest. I fear that tomorrow may see the end of the monarchy.”

“Is it that serious?”

“Henri, this has been building for weeks. Every section of Paris has been planning armed demonstrations for the anniversary of the Oath of the Tennis Court. I don’t see how the municipal authorities or the National Guard can stop them. You see how they’ve ignored the law against armed demonstrations. My sources in the Royal Court tell me that the king took confession and prepared his will. He even gave last souvenirs to his closest friends to remember him by.”

“And which side will you be on, Napoleone?”

“I support the Republic but hate mobs. The king should be subject to the rule of law, not to Santerre’s mobs.”

Napoleone became lost in thought, remembering the mobs that had chased him from his home in Corsica.

## CHAPTER 9

*Paris, France, June 20, 1792*

On the morning of June 20, festive crowds gathered outside the National Assembly building and the Tuileries Palace. After the storming of the Bastille in 1789, King Louis XVI moved the seat of power from his palace at Versailles to Tuileries in Paris. The Estates General, now the National Assembly, followed suit and moved into the Salle du Manege (formerly Louis the XV's indoor riding arena, situated next to the palace).

Antoine Joseph Santerre, known as the King of the *Faubourgs* (suburbs) was leading a group of demonstrators—the largest of many assembled that day to petition the assembly. Santerre, a wealthy brewer from the *faubourg* Saint Antoine, and hugely popular, was a man of paradoxes. Rough in manner, he could be at turns brutal and cruel, or kindly and generous. Like a chameleon, he would blend into the background of any situation and take advantage of the moment at hand. Three years earlier he had led the battalion that stormed the Bastille. When insulted by the Governor of the Bastille, Santerre ordered his lieutenant, Mathieu Jouve Jourdan to saw off the Governor's head. Now, along with Jourdan and eight thousand of his followers, Antoine Joseph Santerre pressed to gain admittance to the Assembly. His plan was to present

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a petition protesting the recent removal of several members of the king's cabinet, and after gaining their blessing, march on to the palace where he planned to assassinate King Louis XVI.

Inside the Assembly building, legislators debated letting the crowds in. One of the legislators noted that armed petitioners had been let in on previous occasions. This prompted another legislator to cry out: "For God's sake, there are eight thousand of them and only seven hundred forty-five of us!" The matter was quickly settled when a legislator allied with Santerre replied, "If eight thousand citizens are waiting, twenty-four million French men and women are waiting for me too!"

With that, the crowds were let into the Assembly building.

Napoleone and Henri, let into the gallery of the Assembly building earlier—thanks to Napoleone's political contacts with the legislators—watched from above in amazement as thousands of Parisians marched through the main hall. At the head of the parade, women and children danced and sang, holding wooden spears called pikes in one hand and olive branches in the other—signifying war or peace. Intermingled among grenadiers and armed National Guardsmen were men and women brandishing all varieties of weaponry: long wooden pikes, forks, axes, scythes, clubs, swords, large daggers, etc. A huge banner that read, "Liberty! Tyrants tremble; the French are armed" was held up high by several women. Another banner held aloft read, "Tremble tyrants, your reign approaches its end."

The celebration in the hall went on for nearly thirty minutes until a loud roll of drumbeats silenced the masses. All eyes were drawn to the assembly hall entrance. Under a phalanx of upraised swords walked Santerre, followed by his bodyguards.

Napoleone and Henri watched intently as Santerre walked up to the bar of the Assembly and addressed the legislators.

"Today will decide whether we live as free French men and women under a constitution or as slaves under a monarch. Dear legislators, you are the protectors of our freedoms and I humbly thank you for allowing us to present our petitions of grievances. I also present to you on behalf of the citizens of France, this flag, the symbol of the republic which we cherish and love so much. For which we will lay down our lives to preserve and protect."

The crowd broke into thunderous applause. Singing and

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dancing ensued as Santerre moved to consult with his trusted lieutenant, Jourdan.

Napoleone turned and whispered into Henri's ear: "The man next to Santerre, Mathieu Jouve Jourdan, has been with him for years. He is very good with a knife. A butcher by trade and reputation. At Bastille, he cut off the head of Governor De Launay for insulting Santerre. He bears watching, Henri." Henri silently nodded as they both continued to watch Santerre and Jourdan.

After the demonstration and speech by Santerre, the President of the assembly, Francaise de Nantes, rose and donned his hat in a gesture of respect. This was followed by a nod of assent from Santerre, at which time the crowd began to withdraw from the Assembly.

\* \* \*

*Tuileries Gardens, 3:15 p.m.*

Santerre and Jourdan, followed closely by Henri and Napoleone, walked among the crowd down the narrow courtyard off the Rue Saint-Honoré that separated the Assembly from the gate leading to the gardens of Tuileries Palace. Henri looked around and noticed people of all ages and description: old crippled war veterans, market porters dressed in their finest clothes, women bearing bouquets of flowers, children running and playing. All seemed to have great joy etched on their faces, marching with their signs and banners aloft, extolling the virtues of freedom, liberty, and the constitution.

Henri turned to Napoleone. In a loud voice so he could be heard above the mass of people, he said, "This looks more like a festive occasion rather than a dangerous demonstration. I do not think we have to worry about the king's safety."

"Henri, look behind you about fifty yards." Napoleone pointed to the left, down the courtyard. "Over there, Henri, through the crowd. Look closely. See the cannon?"

Henri squinted and then nodded as the cannon turned onto the narrow courtyard off the Rue Saint-Honoré.

Napoleone put his hand on Henri's shoulder and spread his other hand across the crowd. "Now, block out the old men, women, and children," Napoleone instructed Henri. "Tell me, what

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do you see? Look at the men carrying pikes. Look at their faces.”

“Yes, I see it now,” Henri replied, looking at the men carrying weapons sprinkled among the festive crowd: their faces hardened, jaws set, eyes fixed with a determined look.

A man dressed like a market porter, carrying a saber and wearing a conical red liberty cap, ran up to Santerre and Jourdan. The three huddled for a few minutes before the man with the saber ran off towards the gate leading to the gardens of Tuileries Palace.

More and more people funneled into the narrow passageway separating the Assembly building and walls of the palace grounds, pressing up against the gate. They found the usually opened gate closed; a single cannon pointed out at the crowd from behind it. People continued to stream down the passageway. The suffocating crowd became increasingly agitated and began to pound on the gate. In an effort to calm the crowd, municipal officers ordered the removal of the cannon—to no avail. The pressure of the crowd broke down the gate; they jubilantly streamed into the gardens of the palace grounds.

Upon learning of the gathering of a large number of demonstrators at the gate to the palace gardens, measures were taken to increase the number of battalions protecting the king. Ten battalions were placed on the terrace of the palace overlooking the gardens. Several more were stationed around the palace at various points and one was stationed inside, along with over a hundred gendarmes of the Paris police.

The crowd marched by the palace facade. The terrace above was lined shoulder-to-shoulder with National Guardsmen.

The Royal Gate, a large double gate secured with a heavy iron bar, was now the only barrier to entry into the palace. Directed by Santerre, several men went to the Royal Gate to argue for an audience with the king. As heated discussions ensued, more demonstrators showed up. Just as it appeared that the guardsmen inside the courtyard had gained the upper hand, Henri looked over at Santerre, standing some twenty paces behind the Royal Gate, and saw him nod to one of his lieutenants. Immediately, an extremely long pike with a tri-color ribbon attached was raised high into the air. It stayed aloft for thirty seconds and then was lowered. The cannon that Napoleone had earlier pointed out to Henri was brought up and aimed at the gate. Suddenly, a booming voice from

inside the courtyard rang out.

“Do not fire! We will open!”

The iron bar holding the double gate was raised by several guardsmen and the gate swung open. Instantly, the crowd poured onto the courtyard leading to the grand staircase: several were trampled to death, having fallen in the onrush.

At the foot of the grand staircase Santerre and Jourdan paused, whereupon two men confronted him loudly.

“Monsieur Santerre, are you going to break the law and enter the king’s residence?”

Santerre replied in an equally loud voice for the crowd to hear: “Bear witness that I refuse to go into the kings’ apartments.”

Napoleone, after observing this, said to Henri, “That was a setup if I ever saw one.”

“No doubt. It looks like he has an alibi for the assassination of the king,” Henri replied.

“So who will be the assassin? Jourdan? He is still by Santerre’s side. Or maybe that market porter with the saber and red liberty cap?”

“Napoleone, look!” Henri pointed to a man running up the palace steps. “Jourdan is moving away from Santerre and entering the palace. I will follow him. You stay with Santerre.”

“Alright, stay close to him Henri. And be on the lookout for the porter with the saber. If you lose sight of Jourdan, go to the king’s apartment.”

After giving Henri directions to the king’s apartment, Napoleone left to follow Santerre, who was huddled with some of his men at the base of the grand staircase.

Everywhere, inside and out, chaos ensued. People were turning over furniture, breaking vases, ripping paintings from the walls. More ominously, several men dragged a cannon up a flight of stairs and were only stopped when it got caught in a doorway, preventing further passage of the crowd. The cannon was dragged back down the stairs to let the impatient crowd continue their rampage through the corridors and rooms of the palace. Overwhelmed by the sheer size and fury of the crowd, National Guardsmen and gendarmes alike stood by helplessly as they watched the spectacle unfold before their eyes.

Meanwhile, Henri followed Jourdan up the stairs to the royal

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apartments. Several in the crowd had already beaten down the doors leading to the first two apartments and were at the door to the third—behind which, King Louis XVI waited with several of his ministers and guards. Henri watched transfixed as several men began pounding on the heavy door with axes. Soon, one of the panels began to give way. Seeing the futility of the situation, the door was ordered open by the king. In a mad rush, protesters streamed in, filling the room to capacity.

One of the ministers to the king addressed the crowd in a loud voice: “Citizens, recognize your king, respect him. The law commands you do it. I will perish; we will all perish rather than allow the least harm to be done to him.”

A few moments of confusion followed. This allowed one of the guards to move the king to a window recess, where he could be better seen by the crowd outside the palace and better protected within.

The next several minutes were a blur. Henri searched the crowd for the market porter in the red cap. Amidst shouts from the crowd directed at the king to overturn his recent decisions, followed by the king’s response to respect the constitution, Henri struggled to move about the royal apartment. He finally located the man in the red cap, brandishing his saber, constantly moving in what appeared to be an attempt to better position himself for an assassination attempt. Also particularly aware of the man’s movements were the National Guardsmen and gendarmes of the Paris police. Transfixed by the efforts of the porter to get in position for a saber thrust, Henri completely lost track of Jourdan. He finally realized to his horror that the movements of the porter were a diversion.

Henri furiously looked for Jourdan, finally spotting him on the other side of the apartment. Smiling, with one arm around a small girl in a soft red cap (the French symbol of liberty) was Jourdan: holding an exceptionally long wooden pike with a sharp metal spear attached to its end. Henri was perplexed for a moment as he slowly moved through the crowd from one end of the apartment to the other, towards Jourdan.

Meanwhile, the king remained surprisingly calm amidst all the threats being hurled at him, answering each in a calm deliberate voice. This was the only thing keeping the king alive, Henri thought.

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Now, about twenty feet from Jourdan, he watched nervously as Jourdan removed the red liberty cap from the little girl's head and placed it over the head of the spear. Continuing to fight through the crowd, Henri struggled to get closer. As he closed to within fifteen feet, Jourdan placed the long pike, its sharpened end hidden by the red cap, into the hands of the little girl. Next, Jourdan moved an old army veteran behind the girl.

Still about ten feet away, Henri watched as Jourdan whispered into the girl's ear. As Jourdan got behind the old veteran and grabbed the end of the pole, Henri realized what was about to happen. With an exceptionally loud voice the girl sang out; "Long live the nation and long live our king."

The trio, holding the pole with the red liberty cap at the end, moved forward diagonally from the corner of the room towards the king. Henri now found himself directly behind Jourdan but still too far away to stop the outcome. As the crowd cheered for the king to take the red liberty cap, Henri began roughly moving people out of his way. He managed to get within five feet of Jourdan.

It was too late!

The pole was lowered to within a foot of the king's chest. The king grabbed the hat and placed it on his head to the cheers of the crowd. Jourdan pulled back on the pike to make the fatal thrust into the king's heart. While making this backward movement to get more leverage into his thrust, several people behind Jourdan moved to the side.

Henri saw his last, only hope.

Amidst deafening cheers of *Long live the nation! Long live liberty!* and *Bravo!* Henri dove forward, his fists striking directly behind Jourdan's knees. This, along with the momentum of Jourdan pulling back on the wooden pike caused him to tumble backwards over Henri. The deadly pike rose harmlessly skyward towards the ceiling. With all the attention focused on the king, nobody in the crowd realized what had just occurred.

Jourdan hit the back of his head on the marble tile floor. He looked at Henri lying beside him; in a daze he asked, "What just happened?"

Henri looked into Jourdan's glassy eyes. Thinking fast, he said, "You just killed King Louis XVI. You must leave, now! Quickly! Make your escape!"

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Henri, smiling to himself, helped the befuddled Jourdan to the door of the king's apartment and watched as he stumbled down the hall towards the stairs.

Outside the king's window, Napoleone could hear the abusive threats being hurled, as could Santerre who watched and waited nearby. Suddenly, the threats turned to cheers of *Bravo! Long live the nation! Long live liberty!*

Santerre smiled. He thought to himself that Jourdan must have completed the job. Lost in a reverie, he was snapped out of it when Napoleone walked up to him.

"That is disgusting!" Napoleon said.

"What are you referring to?" Santerre tentatively asked.

"That!" Napoleone pointed up to the king's window where Louis XVI appeared with the red symbol of the French revolution perched atop his head. "How could the king tolerate those buffoons?"

Santerre looked up in horror, his mouth agape. "I don't believe it." He turned and entered the palace; Napoleone followed on his heels. Going up the stairs leading to the corridors of the Kings' apartments they met a still befuddled Jourdan, going down.

"Jourdan, what happened up there?" Santerre shook Jourdan by the shoulders.

Looking like a confused wild man, Jourdan replied, "The king was assassinated! I need to find Santerre."

"Jourdan, I am Santerre," he replied, looking directly into Jourdan's eyes and gripping him by the shoulders.

Jourdan broke away and stumbled down the stairs, continuing to mumble, "I need to find Santerre."

Santerre, with Napoleone behind him, reached the king's apartment and entered. Inside, they found the king by the window, sitting on a raised chair, taking a drink from a bottle that was offered by one of the mob filling the room. Through an equal mixture of cheers and jeers, people still pressed the king to reinstate the decrees of the National Assembly. The king tried several times to speak above the noise. His guards were having a hard time holding back the crowd. Santerre realized the crowd was turning to his advantage. The right words would tip them over the edge and ensure the king's demise.

Before Santerre could speak, Napoleone, his hand on a knife

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hidden in his waistcoat pocket, gave a sharp jab into Santerre's back. He whispered into his ear: "You may have the king killed my friend, but you will not live to see him hit the floor. The republic is in your hands. If you are willing to die for your cause, now is your moment in history."

Santerre, with a determined look on his face, shouted to the crowd; all eyes instantly turned towards him. "What the devil are you all talking at once for? That is not the way to be heard. We are not going to leave here."

As Santerre spoke these words, Napoleone dug the blade a little deeper into his back.

Santerre continued; "Don't you hear that the king wishes to speak? Let us show him some respect. Your majesty, I apologize for the discomfort we may have caused you, but your people wish their petitions to be heard in the heartfelt manner in which they were presented. You need have no fear from your people. I will be responsible for your safety."

After Santerre spoke, the fervor of the crowd dissipated. The municipal officers (including the mayor) seized the moment: persuading the crowds to disperse and leave the palace.

Outside, on the garden grounds of the palace, Napoleone found Henri.

"What happened in there to Jourdan? We saw him stumbling down the stairs saying the king had been assassinated. He had a wild-eyed look and didn't even recognize Santerre."

Henri smiled and put his arm around Napoleone. They walked to their favorite café off the Rue Saint-Honoré. Two friends; arm in arm, sharing their exploits of the day.

\* \* \*

Two months later, on August 10, 1792, the Tuileries was stormed again. King Louis XVI escaped by secret passageway to the Assembly building where he remained a prisoner until his trial and execution the following year.

\* \* \*

*January 21, 1793, Revolution Square, 10:00 a.m.*

It was a cold, wet, dreary day when the royal carriage arrived at Revolution Square (formerly called Louis XV Square). After a two-

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hour procession through the streets of Paris, lined shoulder-to-shoulder with citizens, King Louis XVI calmly stepped out and gazed up at the scaffolding and guillotine that awaited him. Twenty drummers, lined in front of the scaffolding, did a soft roll of the drums. Santerre, now the chief commander of the National Guard of Paris, escorted King Louis XVI up the steps of the scaffold.

In the crowd, watching events unfold, stood Henri Richaud with his mentor, Professor Pierre-Simon Laplace.

“Well Henri, there is no saving the king this day,” Laplace said, placing a comforting hand on Henri’s shoulder.

“What bothers me more than anything is that Santerre is the one leading him to the guillotine. I wish Napoleone had run him through with his knife.”

“Would it have mattered, Henri?” Professor Laplace said as King Louis XVI walked resolutely up the steps to the platform that held the guillotine and his executioners.

“No, I suppose not.”

“Just like the planets in their orbits. We all have our predestined fates, Henri.”

Henri and Professor Laplace watched as their king reached the platform and turned to address the crowd.

“I die innocent of all the crimes laid to my charge; I pardon those who have occasioned my death; and I pray to God that the blood you are going to shed may never be visited on France.”

The king continued to speak, but a National Guardsman on horseback loudly exhorted the drummers to beat their drums and drown out the king. At the same time, the crowd urged the four executioners to get on with their business.

The king was dragged onto the bed of the guillotine; almost immediately, the blade came down, severing his head. The youngest of the executioners, a lad of eighteen, seized King Louis XVI’s head by the hair and walked around the scaffolding. Holding the severed head up high, the crowd roared back their approval.

Both Henri and Professor Laplace looked on in disgust.

“If this is what a revolution for freedom looks like, I think I would rather be a slave,” Professor Laplace said to Henri.

“I think it would have been better if the king had died at the hands of the mob back at the palace. Was it preordained that I save the king from a murderous mob in June, only to have him

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murdered by the state?”

“Perhaps you are right after all, Henri. Unlike the planets, we decide our own fate.”

“And the fate of France?” Henri said sadly. “I fear that the king’s last words—like his life—will not be honored. ‘I pray to God that the blood you are going to shed may never be visited on France.’”

\* \* \*

And so began a reign of terror that would see France drenched in blood: swallowing up, one after the other, the leaders of the revolution. Meanwhile, Henri and Professor Laplace retreated to the professor’s estate in the countryside where they continued their research, avoiding the political upheavals of Paris.

Henri never again saw Napoleone, the close friend of his youth.

And Napoleone?

He navigated the turbulent currents of French politics, dropped the ‘e’ off the end of his name and became an Emperor.

## CHAPTER 10

*Beaufort, South Carolina; Present Day*

John got up the next morning at five and made himself a pot of coffee. He poured a good strong cup with a splash of Baileys, went over to the kitchen table, sat down and looked out the window, waiting for sunrise. He liked rising early: watching the sun slowly come up, bringing life and light into his small rustic kitchen. Thinking about the revelatory sunbeam and dust mote of the other day, John smiled and shook his head—then quickly cringed as his thoughts turned to James' accident.

*Scary, how quickly one's life could change.*

Just a few days earlier he had been thinking of doing a book on the life of Chief John Ross: the one-eighth Cherokee who in 1828 became the first (and only) elected chief of the Cherokee Nation. When President Andrew Jackson forcibly removed the Cherokee from their lands, Chief John Ross was the one who led them on the thousand-mile march to Oklahoma.

It was a propitious coincidence. The newspaper containing the article on the Indian Removal Act of 1830 (part of John's research) also contained the article on the Floating Man. If not for James' fall off the basement steps and that particular newspaper serving as the resting place for his head, John most likely would not have read all

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the pages.

*Funny how a chain of events could lead your life into a totally new direction.*

After pouring another cup of coffee, John brought his laptop to the table and began his investigative research. He looked up and printed nineteenth-century maps of the Eastern Seaboard from Florida up through Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, including Washington D.C. He was researching the availability of newspapers from 1830 when the back door off the kitchen opened with a squeak.

“Help yourself to some coffee,” John said without turning to see James enter.

James made himself a cup and sat down, placing a battered leather briefcase on the table. Without looking at John he said, “Turn your laptop off.”

“Why? Did you *find* something after I left last night?”

“No. But I couldn’t sleep. That was quite a story you laid on me last night. I kept thinking about that Floating Man, Henri Richaud, and the missing newspapers. It spans the whole summer of 1830. I have a theory about that.”

“Which is?” John closed his laptop, moved it to the side and propped his elbows on the table in front of him.

“I don’t think there are any missing editions.” James paused for a moment before continuing: “At least not for the summer of 1830. There’s only one explanation for the months of June through September being missing in both the office and the house. . . . They didn’t exist.”

“You’re saying the paper was suddenly shut down for those months?”

“I believe so. My great-great-grandfather was quite an adventurer later in life. He traveled all over the world. The first trip he took was to France in 1833, which is quite a coincidence under the circumstances.”

“I was thinking about coincidences before you came in this morning. What are the odds that the same edition I was looking for, containing the Indian Removal Act, would also contain the story about Henri Richaud? But anyway, please, go on.”

“When my ancestor was away on his travels, his son, Robert Jr., would take over the paper. You could always tell by the style of

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writing. But Robert Junior was only around seventeen or eighteen years old in 1830. So my guess is that after seeing Henri Richaud perform on that Saturday in June, Robert must have accompanied him on the rest of his summer tour.”

“That seems logical. But wouldn’t he have written about it? Something like that is a journalist’s dream.”

“*Exactly*. Old Robert wrote about all his travels. Kept them stored in a separate chest. I checked that chest this morning. Nothing on Henri Richaud. And something further puzzles me.”

“What’s that?”

“The journals of his trips are very detailed and read like a novella, except for Robert’s trip to France in the summer of 1833. Now, I realize that this was his first adventure, but the journal is very antiseptic. There’s no life to it. Let’s pretend that my wildest speculation is true: that Henri Richaud accompanied my dear old ancestor to France. That would have been one hell of a journal. If Robert went alone to France, it still should have been one hell of a journal. A young man, first time abroad in one of the most enlightened countries in the entire world . . . it doesn’t make any sense. I made you a copy. You’ll see what I mean. Dead. No life in the writing whatsoever.”

“Quite a mystery we have. Guess I better fire up my laptop and see if I can find some small-town newspapers from 1830 where our Frenchman might have visited.”

“Actually, that’s why I’m here. I told you I couldn’t sleep last night, so I did a computer search of newspapers along the Eastern Seaboard. Here, let me show you.” James opened his briefcase and took out a few papers. “Very few editions from 1830 exist along the route that our Henri Richaud would have taken. No papers from Savannah exist. The Southern Times . . . well, we’re in luck. The State University at Albany has a few from 1830, as does the Library of Congress. The Southern Patriot, which was published in Charleston from 1825 to 1848, is in the Library of Congress; January through July of 1830 is on microfilm. The Charleston Courier and two other Charleston papers from that time are on microfilm at the University of South Carolina. If you don’t mind, I’ll take the liberty of checking those out. Your best bet is the Library of Congress. I found several papers from Jacksonville Florida all the way to Virginia that are archived there.” James

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handed John the printouts. "You can look up Max and Sheila while you're at it."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say thank you."

"Thank you. But there's just one small problem."

John thought about the problem of running a newspaper while doing an investigation and realized instantly that he was staring the solution right in the face. To a beaming James Campbell, former editor of the Beaufort Sentinel, he said evenly, "I hope you're ready to take on the rigors of publishing again. I would feel a little guilty if you were to suddenly drop dead."

"Come, come now, John, admit it . . . you're just a selfish bastard who would miss our evening cocktails together."

"True. Very true. But seriously, are you physically up to it? I don't want to put your health at risk. We can always shut the paper down for a month or two. We do have a precedent in that regard."

"Nonsense. The doctor says it's okay to add a little more activity. Besides, I have these." James pulled a handful of cocoa beans out of his pocket and popped one in his mouth.

"Ah, yes. I forgot. The magic beans. Dark chocolate wasn't good enough."

"Not magic, my dear boy. Purely scientific. These beans come from the Kuna Indians who live on the San Blas Islands off the coast of Panama. For centuries they were isolated from the mainland; these beans form a large part of their diet. They lay the beans on the ground and let the sun roast them naturally. Scientists studying this tribe found they have no incidence of heart disease and cancer. And guess what? When they move to the mainland, they get heart disease. Why?"

"Let me guess. . . . Beans."

"Exactly! Or more precisely, no beans. In fact, a long term study of old men like myself found that there was a fifty percent reduction in mortality for those men who regularly consumed cocoa. And these beans are shipped directly from the San Blas Islands. So no need to worry about me."

"And what does your doctor say?"

"Oh, *him*? . . . He thinks I'm nuts."

## CHAPTER 11

*Washington D.C.*

Despite his protestations and magic cocoa beans, it was over a month before John felt James was up to running the paper alone. The story of a lifetime could wait. Besides, after almost two hundred years, it was not going anywhere. And John had already lost his parents. Losing his mentor and surrogate father figure would be too devastating a blow for him to bear.

On a mid-July morning, John finally felt safe enough to board the seven forty-five flight out of Charleston. After landing at Reagan National, he took the Metro Blue Line to the Capitol South Station and walked the remaining block to the Capitol Hill Suites. It was close to eleven by the time he had checked into his room overlooking Saint Peters Church. Around the block on Independence Avenue was the Library of Congress and the United States Capitol. Further down Independence, less than a mile from the Suites, stood the National Museum of the American Indian.

Before the discovery of the Floating Man, John had planned on visiting the museum to do research on Chief John Ross and the forced removal of the Cherokee. He thought of John Marshall, the famous Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who issued a ruling against the removal, and Andrew Jackson, who infamously said in

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response: “John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it! . . . Build a fire under them. When it gets hot enough, they’ll go.” After finishing up at the Library of Congress, perhaps he would stop at the museum and do some research on the Cherokees and John Ross, their legendary Chief.

John was scheduled to meet Rachel Leeds, a research assistant with the Library of Congress at one in the afternoon. Max, his old friend and boss at the *Washington Post*, had given him Rachel’s number during a phone conversation a couple days earlier. John had called Rachel the next day and told her what newspapers and issues he was looking for. He said he was doing a historical piece on colonial Indians and wanted a perspective about events along the East Coast in the summer of 1830, coinciding with the passage of the Indian Removal Act. He felt a little silly using a cover story, but old habits die hard.

Standing on Independence Avenue, John paused to check his watch. He prided himself on being punctual. He was several minutes early, and felt uncharacteristically nervous. Was it the anticipation of discovering something more on Henri Richaud? Or the ambivalence he felt about being back in Washington? Perhaps both. He looked up at the Thomas Jefferson building, named for our third president who donated his extensive book collection to the Library of Congress after the British burned the original library in 1814. Built in the style of the Italian Renaissance during the late 1880s, the three-level edifice was finally finished and opened to the public in 1897. A renovation one hundred years later restored it to its original splendor.

He arrived at the researcher entrance, located one floor beneath the microfilm collections reading room, ten minutes early. Exactly at one, a tall young lady dressed in business attire opened the door.

“Hi, I’m Rachel,” she said, extending a hand to John. “Hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“No, not at all,” John lied, adding, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Which wasn’t a lie. Taking her hand, he was instantly captivated: intelligence radiated from behind her large, luminous blue eyes; her smile was warm and welcoming. She appeared to be fresh out of college.

*How did Max come to know Rachel?* He wondered to himself.

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“Max told me to give you my undivided attention,” she said, leading John by the hand, up the stairs to the reading room. “Any friend of Max’s is a friend of mine.”

“Same goes for me.” John couldn’t help himself: As they reached the top of the stairs he asked, “How do you *know* Max?”

“In the biblical sense.” Rachel turned around and stifled a laugh at the embarrassed look on John’s face. “We have been living together for the past month.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize. You know, I’ve known Max for years, but I always thought he was married to his job. I don’t think I’ve ever asked him about his love life. Strange, isn’t it?”

“That’s what Max likes about you. You don’t pry into friend’s lives. Only people you are doing a story on. And I hope you never do a story on me.”

“Now that sounds very intriguing. You have secrets worth investigating?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Not me. I’m sure Max told you how I burned out and threw away a promising career.”

“He told me you had a midlife crisis. A few decades early, I would say.” Rachel paused a beat before continuing; “But Max is a big believer in second acts. He thinks you’ll be back better than ever once you sort your life out.”

“I’m afraid I pushed his belief in my salvation to the max, bailing on him like I did. Sorry, that was an awkward pun.”

“John,” Rachel said, giving him a hard stare. “If you were a woman I would say you were a bit of a drama queen. Anyway, that’s all in the past. We’re looking forward to having you over for dinner tonight. Max took the liberty of inviting Sheila, he knew you wouldn’t mind.”

“No, not at all.”

Rachel opened the door of the machine-readable collections room. John noticed a reserved sign on the door. Organized on a large table were a dozen or so rolls of microfilm and several reading machines. Rachel sat down and motioned for John to sit next to her.

“I loaded the microfilm for the Southern Patriot on the machine in front of you. The machines we use now are probably different than the ones you may be familiar with. You can watch me

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load the Charleston Courier roll on this machine, and I'll give you a quick refresher on how to use it." Rachel demonstrated how to load the roll and use the microfilm reader. "The rolls are set out alphabetically, and I took the liberty of including other papers published along the Eastern Seaboard during the months of June through September of 1830 that I thought might interest you. You're probably anxious to get to work, so if there are no questions, I'll check back with you in about an hour. If you need me for anything, just hit extension 4874 on the phone. Any questions before I leave?"

"Just one. How did you and Max meet?"

"He picked me up on a playground by offering me a bag of candy."

"*What?*"

"John, I'm a woman. I saw the way you looked at me. You were thinking I was a little young for Max."

"No, no, I never . . . well yes, I did kind of wonder how old you were. I pegged you as just graduating college."

"Well, that's true, sort of. I did just graduate with my doctorate in library sciences. But I'm not as young as I look. Rather than play that embarrassing game of having you guess my age, I'll just come out and tell you. I'm thirty-nine."

"Amazing what exercise and a good diet can do these days."

"And it helps to get eight hours of sleep each night."

"I wouldn't know about that," John said, as Rachel rose from her chair. "I guess I better get started here and get as much accomplished as I can."

Rachel squeezed John's shoulder. Before she turned to leave the reading room, she said, "I'm really looking forward to dinner tonight. We're starting out with an arugula salad followed by baked salmon with tomato concasse. And then a midnight run along the Reflecting Pool to burn off some calories. On second thought, maybe we'll skip the run and settle for after-dinner drinks."

John wistfully watched a receding Rachel exit the room: happy for his friend and former boss who finally had some balance in his life, sad for the lack of balance in his own life. He stared at the empty doorway for several moments before snapping to and getting to work.

On the first microfilm reader, John looked at the May editions

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of *The Southern Patriot*. Published from 1825–1848, the *Patriot* was a daily newspaper out of Charleston. John had a hunch that the interview mentioned in the Beaufort Sentinel June 4 article would have probably occurred towards the latter half of May.

He flew through the first three weeks of the paper, focusing on the front page. Things got weird when he reached the Friday, May 28 edition of the *Patriot*. There, on the lower half of the front page, was a big blank block that took up almost a quarter of the page. After looking at the rest of the May 28 edition, John looked page by page through the May 29 and May 31 editions. There was no Sunday, May 30 edition. The *Southern Patriot*, like many papers of the era, did not publish on Sundays. John noticed that on the second page of the Monday, May 31 edition, there was a small section in the upper right portion of the newspaper that also contained a blank block, as if it had been cut out.

For the next half hour, John went through each edition of the *Patriot* starting with May 1. When he finished, he had documented three other small sections that were apparently cut out or blanked out. He printed out the pages with missing sections, hopped over to the next machine and began going through the *Charleston Courier*, a tri-weekly newspaper. Charleston, just up the coast from Beaufort, would have undoubtedly been the Floating Man's next stop on his tour up the Eastern Seaboard. Once again, John found several small sections of the newspaper that appeared to have been cut out. The front page of the June 18 edition of the *Courier* had a large quarter section of the paper cut out, leaving another blank section on the microfilm. John printed each of these pages and was loading up the *Charleston Mercury* for June of 1830 when Rachel walked in.

"Find anything interesting?" Rachel asked.

"*Very*. Maybe you can help me find an explanation for this." John slid the printouts to the corner of the table and Rachel leaned over to take a look.

She turned and looked quizzically at John. "What am I looking for?"

"Nothing." John smiled. "Maybe you can explain why there are all these blank sections, as if someone had cut them out."

"That's weird. On rare occasions when we have the only copy of a newspaper, and no other copies exist, there might be an article that someone cut out back when it was printed. But these

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newspapers aren't rare. Several other institutions have copies of the Charleston papers."

"So what is your best guess?" John asked.

"I haven't a clue. Why don't we load a couple more newspapers and see what else we find?"

"Good idea. I just loaded the Charleston Mercury."

"Let me load up these other readers while you flip through yours."

Rachel loaded three more readers while John looked through the *Charleston Mercury*. After she had finished loading the rolls, Rachel hopped on one of the readers. Thirty minutes and four rolls later, they had discovered several more pages with blank sections. Moving quickly now, searching only for blank sections, they finished every roll of each newspaper originally requested by John, along with a few more that Rachel had pulled. In total, they printed up sixty pages with blank sections. John had the idea of seeing if there were blank sections in the same newspapers earlier in the year of 1830. Rachel left, returning a few minutes later with several rolls of microfilm for February and March. After another thirty minutes of scrolling, they were both stunned to find no other instances of missing sections.

John thanked Rachel for her help and returned to his room at the Capitol Hill Suites. It was five in the afternoon. Tired and disappointed, John decided to take a nap before leaving for dinner with Max, Rachel, and Sheila.

## CHAPTER 12

At six fifteen, John's cell phone awakened him from a light sleep. He looked at the display and saw James name.

"James, what's up?"

"What the *devil* have we gotten into?"

"What do you mean?"

"I looked all day at microfilm and some original newspapers at the university and only got one small item out of the Charleston Observer from June 26." James paused for a beat. "And the rest were all blank sections. As I got to the latter part of 1830, the blank sections became fewer and smaller. Damn strange thing. I looked at previous years and no blank sections. What about you? Any luck?"

"Nada, zilch. All blank sections here too. You said you *found* an item?"

"Two letters to the editor concerning the performance of Henri Richaud in Charleston. One by a reader named Daniel Rutledge and the other by Harriott Pinckney Horry, a lady with quite an illustrious lineage. When you get back, I'll tell you the history of the Horry family and Hampton Plantation. But let me read you the letters. First is Mr. Rutledge's letter: 'I attended the performance last week of the illustrious Henri Richaud and his Floating Machine. He seems like a most genial fellow, but his machine was most terrifying. With the sound of a hundred

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thousand hummingbirds, I watched awestruck as his floating machine hovered over our heads and then would dart from one end of the field to the other. All the while that humming noise seemed to penetrate every part of my body and left me with a tingling sensation. Most terrifying, for myself and those gathered, was when the Frenchman rose to a height of what appeared to be several hundred feet. He remained there, suspended; then, to our horror, he came hurtling straight down towards us and the earth: stopping mere inches from the ground. Daniel Rutledge.’

“The next letter is from Harriott Horry: ‘I would like to say how delighted we are at Horry House to have here residing, our most esteemed guests: Henri Richaud and his chronicler and companion, Robert Campbell, Editor of the Beaufort Sentinel. Mr. Richaud is a French intellectual of the highest merit. His magnificent conveyance is a wonder, based on the sound scientific principles of the late scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace of France and the gravitational laws of Sir Isaac Newton. We have been delighted to share our home with Mr. Richaud and have very much enjoyed his witty conversations of his youthful years with the late Emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte. It is to my most solid satisfaction that I am to accompany Mr. Richaud and Mr. Campbell on their journey to Georgetown next week. Harriott Pinckney Horry.’”

James paused briefly. “That’s it. Confirms my theory about the missing editions of the Sentinel though.”

John was wide awake now and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“If your grandfather was chronicling the journey of Henri Richaud, there has to be some memoirs. Yet you didn’t find anything.”

“I have all his travel memoirs laid out chronologically in a separate storage chest. Maybe since this predates the rest of his travels, he stored it somewhere else. But John, I’ve run out of places to look.”

“Well, we still have other private libraries and universities that have copies of the same papers. And we now know which editions to look for.”

“The ones with blanks.”

“Yep.”

“John, who would ever imagine . . . a cover-up from the 1830s?”

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“I’ve been trying not to think of that, but I guess there is no other explanation. Listen, I have to get ready for dinner. Look forward to hearing the story of this—what’s her name?”

“Harriott Horry. See you when you get back.”

John hit end and got ready for dinner. He thought about where this story might lead but realized he really didn’t have a clue, other than to find newspapers, somewhere, without the missing sections. At least the Library of Congress had a complete list of institutions (universities, private libraries, historical societies, etc.) with holdings for these newspapers, down to the year and edition available. Several editions with missing sections were available from multiple sources. It gave John a headache: the thought of running all over the country searching for a few missing articles. Maybe at dinner his friends would give him a different perspective or line of attack on this investigation.

## CHAPTER 13

At seven in the evening, John was dropped off by taxi at Max's colonial style home in a fashionable section of Bethesda. Waiting to greet him at the door was his old friend. Noticing that the rotund Max had not only shed his mustache but also quite a few pounds, John couldn't resist taking a light jab at his former editor.

"Max! Good to see you. Or what is left of you."

"Atkins diet." They shook hands and Max ushered John inside. After a minute of requisite small talk, Max said, "Why don't you go into the kitchen and say hello to Sheila and Rachel while I make you a drink. Is it still whiskey?"

"You've got it. And a couple rocks."

John went into the kitchen and exchanged hellos with Rachel and Sheila. He asked Sheila how her job with the staff of the NSC was going. Okay, she said. He asked how she liked working for Henry Smith. Rarely saw him was her reply. Sheila congratulated John on his new job as editor of the Sentinel . . . sort of.

And then Rachel turned to Sheila and said, "I was helping John at the library today while he browsed through some old southern newspapers from 1830. He uncovered a most curious thing. Do you want to tell Sheila the story, John?"

"No, you go right ahead. There's a lot more to the story; I'll save it for after dinner. But go ahead and whet Sheila's appetite

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while I keep your boyfriend and my whiskey company.”

John and Sheila shared slightly bemused smiles before he turned and went back into the study. He sat down on an old leather chair and picked up the drink that Max had placed for him on the cocktail table.

“Max, it’s really good to see you. You don’t know how much I’ve missed you.”

“Is that why you didn’t call until two days ago?”

“I was just too embarrassed to call. There were several times I picked up the phone, but I just couldn’t bring myself to call.”

“Yeah, you were a mess. I figured getting away from the rat race of Washington for a little while would be the best thing for you to do. That’s why I didn’t call either. Didn’t want to stir up old ghosts. Speaking of old, how’s your friend doing?”

John told Max about discovering James unconscious and bleeding in the basement. He laughed when John told him of James’ sudden revival and response to his CPR efforts.

“I have to meet this guy, sounds like a real character.”

“Actually, he thinks he *is* a character,” John said with a straight face. “Casper Gutman from the Maltese Falcon.”

“Oh, hell John, now I definitely have to meet him.”

“Positively, James would say. A line from the movie.” John leaned in a little closer, as if speaking conspiratorially. “But the most amazing thing, Max, is that James *literally* stumbled onto the story of a lifetime when he fell down the base—.”

“Some historical piece on the removal of the Indians during colonial times,” Max interrupted. “Rachel told me. She also told me about some missing sections in newspapers. That’s rather odd, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is. But that’s not the real story. Wait until after dinner Max, it gets weirder, a whole lot weirder.”

\* \* \*

Over dinner of baked salmon with tomato concasse the old friends relived their glory days at the *Washington Post*. Max told a story for Rachel’s benefit of the time he was seated on the campaign bus of then candidate George W. Bush and had accidentally spilled his whiskey flask on W’s shirt. The future president’s aides were in a frenzy. Rumors had just been spread,

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presumably by someone on Al Gore's staff, that W was hitting the bottle again due to the pressures of the campaign. It seems George was just minutes away from a meeting with some leading southern evangelical ministers, and reeking of whiskey was not on the candidate's agenda. Max had admired how good-naturedly the then candidate took it all, as his staff whirled around him, frantically trying to find someone with the same size shirt.

Sheila told Rachel about John and their initial frosty relationship at the *Post*. John admitted being a bit of an ass in prejudging Sheila based on her looks, but he tried to blame it on her provocative attire and the power of her feminine ways, eliciting chuckles from Rachel and Sheila. After much deliberation, all agreed that John had in fact been an ass, and that Sheila would look provocative even if she wore an oversized, dirty grey sweatshirt and pants. The subject ended abruptly when Rachel gave Max a stare after he added that Sheila would even look provocative in a pair of mom jeans. With that, dinner was adjourned. Max was put in charge of mixing drinks while everyone moved to the sitting room.

\* \* \*

John told them the story from the beginning. How he had found James lying in the basement after he had fallen and struck his head, landing on the June 4, 1830 edition of the Beaufort Sentinel. How he had read the bloodstained paper and stumbled upon the story of Henri Richaud, and how he stared at a sunbeam and made this story his life's mission. The latter revelation drew raised eyebrows. John recounted the search for the missing newspapers at the office and at James' home. The missing sections on microfilm at the library, and the call earlier in the evening on the additional piece found by James.

Max was the first to comment. "It's almost *too* unbelievable. If it wasn't for that last piece and those missing sections of microfilm, I would think that this editor of the Sentinel was having some fun with his readers. Creating some sort of hoax to entertain the locals on a slow news week."

Sheila added, "The part that gives me goose bumps is the description of the sound of this floating machine as the humming of a hundred thousand hummingbirds."

"That would freak me out today," Rachel said, looking over at

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Sheila. "Imagine what those people back in 1830 felt like when they saw and heard that thing."

Sheila turned to John. "Is there any description of this floating machine?"

"None from the two small articles we have so far."

Max asked Sheila, "Is there any way you can find out if there are any files on this Richaud fellow in one of the intelligence archives?"

"Beats me, Max. I can give it a try. I'll do a search through some of our databases. It wasn't until the FDR administration that the government centralized records. Before then, each branch and agency of the government was responsible for maintaining their own records, and unfortunately, a lot of them were lost or destroyed as a result."

Interested in this line of inquiry, John interjected, "If the government way back in the 1830s was trying to cover-up what hap—"

"That's too fantastical to imagine," Max interrupted. "The Jackson administration rounding up all these newspapers and censoring them? Kind of hard to believe."

Rachel leaned toward Max and said, "They rounded up all the Indians and got rid of them."

"And let's not forget the Dreyfus affair in the 1890s. The French government forged documents, threatened witnesses and faked depositions, all to keep an innocent man imprisoned on Devil's Island," Sheila added.

John asked everyone to play along with him for a second.

"What if, putting everything else aside for a moment, the government did have an interest in covering this up? After all, this is a foreigner that seemingly possessed a technology, far in advance of anything previously known to science. They would have collected as much information as they possibly could about this fellow and his antigravity device. There would have been files stored somewhere, and possibly even the machine itself."

"The most logical place would have been the White House, or maybe the War Department," Sheila said.

"That's where you should start then," Max said, turning to Sheila.

Sheila reminded Max: "You forget that all records were

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consolidated during the FDR administration. It would be harder than finding a needle in a haystack.”

“But something that secret and sensitive would have been kept separate, don’t you think?” John asked.

Rachel, eager to add to the discussion said, “That’s assuming the records were not already missing or destroyed, and long forgotten.”

After a lot more back and forth and what ifs, Max asked John, “So where do you proceed from here? What are your next steps?”

“I have a list of institutions that have copies of these missing editions. If there was a cover-up or government program to censor these records, I doubt they were as efficient back then as we are today. But then again, there were not as many records to destroy. So, first I search those records and see if anything further pops up and see where that leads me. Also, maybe Sheila can find out if there are still any government records, located somewhere, on Henri Richaud.”

“And I can continue to look through the records at the Library of Congress,” Rachel said, quickly adding, “If you don’t mind?”

“Not at all. I could use all the help I can get.”

Sheila, acting like the investigative reporter she once was, said, “John, why don’t you make copies of everything you have and we can all do a little. I’m sure Rachel has contacts at other libraries and universities so you don’t have to run around the country. I can use my contacts in government, and Max has his, which shall go nameless so that I don’t have to have them arrested for leaking government secrets.”

Max smiled at Sheila. “So you don’t have to arrest *yourself*?”

“That too.” Sheila smiled back.

“Sounds like a plan,” John said, rising from his chair. “It’s getting late. I’d like to get an early start tomorrow at the library.”

“It’s getting a little late for me too,” Sheila said. She got up and turned to John. “I’ll give you a ride back to your hotel.”

“Isn’t that a little out of your way?”

“I don’t mind if you don’t.”

“Not at all,” John said, taking hold of Sheila’s hand.

After the requisite goodbyes, John and Sheila got into her car and drove off. During the short drive they asked each other subtly about their personal lives. Both were quietly pleased to discover

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that neither was seeing anyone romantically.

Sheila was first to dive into the pool of romance.

“You know, John, before you left so suddenly from the Post, I thought that we were on our way to developing a closer relationship.”

“I know,” John responded. “I just felt like it wouldn’t have been fair to you, considering how messed up I was. And then you joined the NSC. That kind of ended any chance of a love affair.”

“Don’t you think you kind of overstate how messed up you were. *Christ*, half the reporters on staff drink too much, and you wouldn’t believe who is sleeping with who in Washington.”

“I don’t know. I thought it was a big enough problem, and I didn’t want to jeopardize your career.”

“John.” Sheila turned and gave him a withering look. “I’m a big girl. Rachel told me earlier that she called you a drama queen. But I think you’re more like one of those throwback men of an earlier age that thinks women need to be sheltered from life’s unseemly side.”

“Gee, thanks, Sheila. So basically, I screwed up our love life before it ever began is what you’re telling me. I feel so much better. I think I’ll get drunk and celebrate.”

“There’s always second acts in the theatre of love. Even for drama queens,” Sheila said as she put her hand on John’s leg and squeezed gently.

“Sheila, you missed the turn for the Capitol Hill Suites.”

“I know.”

Sheila smiled and looked straight ahead as she turned into the underground parking garage of her apartment building.

\* \* \*

John had the best night of his life. Sheila had no complaints either. And the next morning—

John awoke to the sound of the shower turning on. He got out of bed, walked into the bathroom and asked Sheila, “Would you like a little help with the soap?”

“Come on in.”

Sheila turned around and handed him the bar of soap. “You can suds up my back, and if you’re good, I’ll let you do these babies.” She grabbed her perfectly shaped breasts, gave John a quick peck on the lips and turned back around.

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John washed Sheila's back and then moved his hands around and massaged her large firm breasts, letting the soap fall to the floor.

Sheila moaned softly. She pushed back into John's hard erection as he continued to gently massage her breasts; her nipples swelling and stiffening under his touch. "Hmm harder, squeeze harder."

John entered her from behind, thrusting and squeezing harder as the tempo of their lovemaking increased exponentially.

In between hurried breaths and moans she urged him on. "Harder, harder."

John, lost in the moment, letting go of all the pent-up frustrations and disappointments of his life, thrust harder and faster. Sheila, muscles taut, hands braced against the shower wall, pushed back in rhythm to meet his thrusts until they finally came together in an explosion.

They slowly slid to the floor of the tub; Sheila lay back on John, his hands still tight around her breasts. They lay there for a short while, letting the warm water of the shower rain over them, lost in the moment, until Sheila said, "John, excuse me dear, but do you mind—my tits, please?"

John quickly let go as he realized he was still holding on tightly to her breasts. Looking at the deep red marks from where his fingers had dug in, he said apologetically, "God Sheila, I'm sorry. I must have gotten carried away. Does it hurt?"

"Hell yeah it hurts!" Sheila said as she lifted herself up. Standing over John, still lying in the tub she continued, "Let me dig my fingers into your balls and tell me how it feels."

"I'm sorry. I don't know how I got so carried away."

"You don't know *how* you got so carried away?" Sheila said incredulously as she put her hands on her hips. "Seriously? Look at me." She tucked her stomach in and thrust out her chest, a panic-stricken John looked up helplessly.

Sheila couldn't help but break out laughing.

"My God, Rachel is right. You are a drama queen."

John, smiling a little too shyly for a thirtysomething year old man, got to his feet. They stepped out of the tub and dried each other off.

Sheila examined herself in the mirror.

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John watched, commenting, "That's gotta hurt."

"I think it looks sexy," Sheila said, examining the red marks. "It's something to remember you by when you're back in South Carolina." Sheila turned and faced John, caressed his head with her hands. As John placed his hands on her hips she continued: "Every time I see these marks or jiggle a little and feel the pain, I'll think of you." Sheila paused for a moment and then added with a lascivious sneer, "It'll make me hot."

"And what happens when the marks disappear and the pain goes away?"

"It'll be time for round two. After a few more rounds with me, you'll be crying uncle and begging for your old job back so you can spend the rest of your life with me."

## CHAPTER 14

John spent each day at the Library of Congress, and each evening in sexual congress with Sheila. And after a week, all John had for his troubles were more blank sections and a sore dick. But John was ecstatic. He was in love and on a quest. Every little bit of missing newspaper was a clue to him. Max's girlfriend Rachel had been a godsend. Even working after hours at the library.

From the missing sections of various newspapers they were able to establish that the story of the Floating Man had spread as far south as St Augustine, north as far as Richmond, and west to Atlanta. James continued his research at the University of South Carolina and a few historical societies. Rachel called other libraries and universities and had researchers looking through their copies. So far, none had reported anything other than the same ubiquitous missing sections.

Sheila did a search through several government databases as far as her security clearance would allow. Using key words: Henri Richaud, the Floating Man, Simon Pierre La Place and antigravity, she had come up empty-handed. She asked colleagues with connections at the CIA to see if there was a file anywhere in Langley on the subject, but again came up empty-handed. Max, likewise, through his contacts came up empty.

\* \* \*

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Friday at half past noon, John, Sheila, Max, and Rachel met for lunch at Le Bon Café, just around the corner from the Library of Congress on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE. With its signature blue and white striped awning, Le Bon, a Parisian-style sidewalk café, seemed the perfect place to meet on John's last day in Washington. Sheila, arriving first along with John, chose a table on the sidewalk to enjoy the summer weather. Max was only a minute behind. Last to arrive was Rachel, who worked the closest to Le Bon. John pointed out that she was just conforming to the laws of physics.

"Very funny, John. Maybe I'll just make you wait before telling you what I found," Rachel said, sitting down in a chair next to Max, who handed her a menu.

"Rachel, you *found* something? What did you find?" John leaned over and looked anxiously at Rachel.

"I'll tell you what I found. . . . NOTHING!"

Rachel leaned back, smug, enjoying John's tortured look.

Max turned to Rachel. "Ouch, that was cruel."

"Well," Sheila said, "it seems we've all been striking out."

Max asked John if James had found anything further.

"Nothing. In addition to the universities in North and South Carolina, he's looked at several private collections. Nothing but those blank sections everywhere we search."

Sheila put her hand tenderly on John's thigh and asked, "I thought James had a bad heart. Is all that running around good for him?"

John shrugged. "I told him to take it easy, but he says that this has been the best thing for his heart. He really seems to enjoy the search. He tells me in every conversation that it's like the search for the Maltese Falcon."

"That's kinda weird," Sheila said.

"Not really," John replied. "He's a dead ringer for Casper Gutman, just minus a few pounds."

"*Who?*" Rachel asked.

"Sydney Greenstreet," Max replied.

"I thought you said he looked like some guy named Casper?" Rachel now looked totally confused.

"Sydney Greenstreet and Casper Gutman are one and the same person, dear," Max said helpfully. "Sydney Greenstreet played the character of Casper Gutman in a famous black and white movie

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starring Humphrey Bogart. It involved the search for a jewel encrusted statue of a falcon.”

“And how did it turn out?”

“Don’t ask,” Max replied, feigning irritation.

\* \* \*

Halfway through lunch, Rachel was taking a bite out of her Tuna Provencal when her smartphone rang. She put her sandwich down and answered. She didn’t recognize the caller at first, then said, “Oh yes, Frank from Florida U.” Rachel listened intently. “That’s great. I’ll check it out as soon as I get off the phone.” A long pause, followed by a few uh-huhs and then Rachel ended the call by saying, “Yes, absolutely, please do, and thanks so much, Frank.” A shorter pause, another uh-huh, and then, “Okay, bye now.”

Everyone waited expectantly for Rachel to tell them about the call as she bent down to grab her iPad out of her handbag. Rachel turned on the iPad and began talking while pulling up her email. “That was Frank Schwartz from the University of Florida at Gainesville. He found a small article on Henri Richaud from a copy of the *Winyaw Intelligencer* out of Georgetown, South Carolina.”

Everyone huddled around Rachel; all eyes glued to the iPad as she opened the attachment. The article in the *Winyaw Intelligencer* was from July 5, 1830. They all followed along as Rachel read the headline: “Floating Man shot at over Waterfront!” She paused for a moment before plunging ahead with the article.

“Henri Richaud, known as the Floating Man from France was performing his aerial maneuvers along and over the waterfront in downtown Georgetown when musket fire rang out. It was not known if he was struck by any of the musket balls, but several eyewitnesses said that immediately afterwards, the Floating Man, with a companion on board, was observed flying in an erratic manner over Winyaw Bay. It appeared that he was having trouble controlling his device, and this led to speculation that perhaps one of the shots had struck either the machine or Mr. Richaud. Spectators said that the shots appeared to come from behind the crowd, perhaps from the roof of one of the buildings located along the waterfront. Several federal soldiers who had accompanied John Eaton, President Jackson’s secretary of war, fanned out in the

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direction of the shots, several more raced out on horseback in pursuit of the Floating Man's machine.

"Secretary Eaton, in attendance for the demonstration of the antigravity device at the request of President Jackson, would not comment, other than to say he was here only to observe and officially welcome Mr. Richaud on behalf of the president.

"Later in the day, witnesses reportedly saw smoke rising from a forested area southwest of town in the direction of Mr. Richaud's line of travel. Of peculiar note was the observation of Mrs. Lillian Pembroke, wife of Reverend Pembroke, who insisted she saw Mr. Richaud's companions (including a woman and Negress on horseback) ride off to the south, down Island Road, accompanied by several Cherokee Indians, before the shots were fired. As of the date of this publication, no further details on the fate and whereabouts of Henri Richaud and his amazing antigravity device are known."

As John and his lunch companions excitedly talked over these new developments, no one noticed the well-dressed couple at the next table, quietly sipping espressos. The couple listened intently through earpieces built into their eyeglasses, connected wirelessly to a directional microphone and recorder—both concealed in the woman's stylish purse that sat next to her on the table.

"The mystery deepens," Max said as they finished lunch and prepared to leave. "Is our man Henri dead or alive? And who is this other companion of his?"

"And now we have a secretary of war involved—another lead to follow," Rachel added.

"And what mystery would be complete without a few Indians thrown in. Right, John?" Sheila got up and gave John a kiss on the cheek. "See you at dinner."

Everyone went back to work, except John. Alone at the table, he pulled up the email that Rachel had forwarded and began to read the article . . . over and over again.

## CHAPTER 15

John arrived back in Beaufort shortly after noon on Saturday, met at the Charleston airport by James. It was a hot, July day, with angry clouds overhead that threatened to burst at any moment. James dropped off John with an invitation to join him for lunch after he settled in. John accepted. Two hours later, after a light lunch, both men adjourned with drinks in hand to James' front porch swing just as the sky opened up. Amid thunder and pouring rain, the two sat and talked about the events of the past few weeks. James seemed a bit drawn in the face. John was worried that the excitement may have been a little too much for him. He urged his friend to take it easy now that he was back, but James waved that suggestion away, saying he would like to continue on at the paper while John concentrated on "the investigation" as they both referred to it.

As what appeared to be an all-day rain continued, along with occasional lightning and thunder, John asked James about the "Hairy woman."

"It's Horry. Harriott Pinckney Horry," James said. He paused to take a sip of his scotch and water. Sheets of rain came down, casting a grey sheen over the landscape. "Kind of looks like a scene from an old black and white movie, doesn't it?"

"The rain does seem to lend a film noir cast to everything,"

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John said. Leaning over to joke, he added, "You aren't going to go into your Sydney Greenstreet character, are you?"

"Maybe," James replied. Changing the subject he added, "So, did you call Sheila to let her know you arrived home safely?"

"Am I supposed to?"

"You're a couple now, aren't you?"

"I didn't think of it that way, but you're right," John said, continuing to sit dumbly with drink in hand.

James laughed, shook his head and looked down. "I don't know how you ever became an investigative reporter, as clueless as you are."

"*What?*" John looked at James with a baffled look on his face.

"Go! Go inside and call her. . . . Jeez."

"Right, sorry. It's just that I was . . . never mind," John stammered as he got up and went inside to give Sheila a call.

He returned a few minutes later, plopped back down on the swing, and turned to James. "Now for the Hairy woman."

"Horry. But first." James raised his empty glass.

John dutifully got back up and went inside with it.

Returning with refilled glasses he sat back down.

"Now, can we talk about Harriott . . . Pinckney . . . Horry?"

"Very well. Let's talk. I'll tell you straight out, sir, that I like talking to a man who is judicious in his speech and gets right to the heart of the matter," James said in perfect Casper Gutman voice.

"Now that was good. I have to hand it to you. Even Mr. Greenstreet himself would have been impressed."

"Thank you," James said, glowing like a little kid.

"You know, James, considering the atmosphere and the old black-and-white quality the rain is lending to this scene, I think it would be appropriate to tell the story of this lady in character."

"Seriously?"

"Positively." John smiled and raised his glass.

Raising his glass in a return salute, James said, "A toast to plain speaking and clear understanding."

Both men took a sip. James put his glass down and began the story of Harriott Pinckney Horry in the voice of Casper Gutman from the *Maltese Falcon*.

"Harriott Pinckney Horry comes from one of South Carolina's most illustrious families. Born into high society, there are actually

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two Harriott Pinckney Horrys: mother and daughter. The mother, coincidentally, died in the same year as Henri's visit to Horry house, better known as Hampton Plantation. But, my dear boy, I'm getting ahead of myself." James patted John's knee and stared at him with the same bulging eyes that were so characteristic of Sydney Greenstreet's characters. John looked on, spellbound by the metamorphosis of his friend.

"The story begins in 1744 when Daniel Horry purchased six hundred acres in the Saint James Santee Parish district of Charleston, near what is now present-day McClellanville. The Low Country, as it is still called today, was the home of great wealth and power for the aristocratic elite of South Carolina. A rich loamy soil created by clearing the cypress swamps allowed the native indigo plants, which grew wild up and down the coastal plains, to be cultivated. Fortunes were made off the dye it produced, and hundreds of miles of canals were dug, crisscrossing the great cypress swamps. Daniel Horry's wealth began to grow. Toward the latter part of the 1740s, Daniel built a beautiful Georgian-style mansion along the banks of Wambaw Creek. The envy of all the other planters.

"In 1763 old man Horry died and left the plantation to his son, Daniel Huger Horry. The young son was just as industrious and shrewd as the old man. By the mid-eighteenth century, worldwide production of indigo began to increase dramatically. Daniel, the young newcomer, was shrewd enough to foresee that prices would soon fall precipitously. The young man replaced his father's indigo and began cultivating rice: ideally suited for swampy lands. Daniel was fortunate that among the slaves his dad had acquired were several from Senegal's rice growing region of West Africa. One slave, Eboe John, was particularly adept at planting and harvesting rice. Together, they grew a long golden grain that was known throughout the world as Waccamaw Gold.

"Soon the coastal areas of South Carolina became the largest rice culture in the world. Rice replaced indigo as King of the Low Country, and Daniel's profits increased exponentially. Of course, alongside this enormous wealth came the great evil of our time. . . . Slavery. But even in this evil enterprise, Daniel excelled. He had an uncanny ability to take other planter's castaway slaves and make them profitable by treating them a bit better, and working alongside

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them. By the eve of the Revolutionary War, his hard work and the soaring price of rice had helped increase the family holdings to several thousand acres and several hundred slaves.”

James paused to savor a sip of scotch. He looked out at the sheets of rain hammering the landscape. His thoughts became lost in the grey misty veil that enveloped them.

John waited a few moments before softly interrupting the silence. “Where do the Horry women come into the story?”

James snapped out of his reverie.

“The younger Daniel married his second wife, Harriott Pinckney, in 1768. Her father, Charles Pinckney—who died a decade before the marriage—had risen through the political ranks to become Chief Justice of the then Province of South Carolina. During the Revolutionary War, the planters, including Daniel, went off to fight the British, leaving Harriott in charge to run Hampton plantation. Hampton became a refuge for friends and relatives, including Daniel’s mother, the widow Eliza.

“In 1780 the British captured Charleston and searched the nearby plantations for a local planter named Francis Marion, who had been a large thorn in their side for two years. Marion, a neighbor of the Horry’s, led a band of local men in resistance to the British. Having learned guerrilla tactics from the Indians, he and his men set up ambushes and then retreated back into the cypress swamps, which they knew like the back of their hand.”

As James paused to finish his scotch and water, John blurted; “The Swamp Fox!”

“*Precisely.* The name was given to him by the British commander, a man named Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who had the unfortunate duty to try and capture him.”

“Right! The Leslie Nielsen character from the old Disney series. I remember the theme song: Swamp Fox! Swamp Fox! Tail on his—”

“You know my good man,” James interrupted. “If you wish for me to keep speaking in character, you must quit with your inane banalities.”

“Sorry. Please continue, Mr. Gutman.”

“Well then, as I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me with your unfortunate remark about some obscure character actor, this neighbor of the Horry’s was being hunted by the British and

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took refuge in the main house on Hampton Plantation. It was the young daughter and namesake of Harriott Pinckney Horry who woke a sleeping Francis Marion and led him out the back door, while her mother—then twenty-one years old—flirted with Colonel Tarleton in a most provocative way, buying the Swamp Fox just enough time to swim across Wambaw Creek and hightail it through the rice fields.”

“Close call, huh?”

“Close call *indeed*. And the kicker is that Harriott’s mother proved to be so charming and provocative, dare I say, indiscreet, that the completely smitten colonel ordered his men to take nothing from the house during their search for Francis Marion. Quite unusual for the British. But then again, so were the Horry’s, mother and daughter.”

“Quite a story,” John said. “I thought you were going to throw George Washington in there somewhere.”

“Actually, he came a little later, in 1791 during his southern tour. And in 1793 when Eliza, the matriarch of the family, died, he offered to be a pallbearer at her funeral.”

“Seriously?” John asked incredulously.

“Positively,” James said, taking a folded sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket. “Let’s reread the article I found last week, shall we?”

James unfolded the paper and placed it on his lap. John leaned to the side and stared down at one of the only known articles on Henri Richaud, and the only one connected to Harriott Pinckney Horry. Both silently read the short article from the June 26, *Charleston Observer*.

*I attended the performance last week of the illustrious Henri Richaud and his Floating Machine. He seems like a most genial fellow, but his machine was most terrifying. With the sound of a hundred thousand hummingbirds, I watched awestruck as his floating machine hovered over our heads and then would dart from one end of the field to the other. All the while that humming noise seemed to penetrate every part of my body and left me with a tingling sensation. Most terrifying, for myself and those gathered, was when the Frenchman rose to a height of what appeared to be several hundred feet. He remained there, suspended; then, to our horror, he came hurtling straight down towards us and the earth: stopping mere inches from the ground. Daniel*

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*Rutledge.*

*I would like to say how delighted we are at Horry House to have here residing, our most esteemed guests: Henri Richaud and his chronicler and companion, Robert Campbell, Editor of the Beaufort Sentinel. Mr. Richaud is a French intellectual of the highest merit. His magnificent conveyance is a wonder, based on the sound scientific principles of the late scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace of France and the gravitational laws of Sir Isaac Newton. We have been delighted to share our home with Mr. Richaud and have very much enjoyed his witty conversations of his youthful years with the late Emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte. It is to my most solid satisfaction that I am to accompany Mr. Richaud and Mr. Campbell on their journey to Georgetown next week. Harriott Pinckney Horry.*

John turned to James after he read the article.

“Did you print out a copy of that attachment Rachel sent you?”

“Of course.”

“Get it . . . please.”

“Be right back.” James rose and went inside. He returned a few minutes later with two copies of the attachment from Rachel’s email, and a refreshed scotch and water. They reread the article from the Georgetown *Winyaw Intelligencer* that had caused so much excitement before John had left Washington.

After he finished the article, James turned to John: “I don’t know why I didn’t think of it the other day. The other companion must be Harriott Pinckney Horry.”

“And the Negress? Perhaps one of Harriott’s slaves. But what about the Indians?”

“No clue,” James replied.

They fell silent, watching the rain, thunder, and lightning. Their thoughts lost in a mystery, so close geographically, so distant in time.

## CHAPTER 16

The next two weeks passed without any new articles appearing. Rachel, continuing to plug away at the Library of Congress, was coming up empty—so were her contacts across the country. Nothing was reported other than the ubiquitous missing sections.

Initially buoyed by the discoveries in Washington, John started to get discouraged. After only two weeks back in Beaufort, James' concern for his friend was so great that he surreptitiously got Sheila's phone number from John's cell phone. Sheila was surprised when she got the call from James, but appreciated his concern. She had planned to visit in a couple weeks. After getting off the phone with James she decided to move her plans up.

Sheila gave John a call. He didn't protest when she said she had vacation time coming and wanted to spend it with him. She didn't mention the call from James—it would be their little secret, as she had put it.

John met Sheila at the airport in Charleston on Saturday morning. After a warm embrace, he struggled with her luggage, remarking that it seemed she was planning on more than a two-week visit.

“Don't get your hopes up, buddy,” she replied as John loaded her luggage into the trunk of his Grand Marquis.

Sheila stepped into the passenger side and buckled herself in,

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commenting on John's choice of ride: "I see you drive an old man car," she snickered.

"What? Who? What's an omackar?" John said in a mock old man's voice.

"Well at least you can see above the steering wheel."

Sheila smiled and relaxed as John turned off I-526 and headed south, down Savannah Highway, towards Beaufort. In less than an hour and a half they were crossing over Huspa Creek on US Route 21 into Beaufort; minutes later they pulled up to the Sentinel on Boundary Street.

Waiting at the front door to greet them was James. He winked at Sheila and took her by the hand, leading her across the threshold.

"So good to see you, my dear. You're even more beautiful than John described. Something I thought would be quite impossible."

"Why thank you, James," Sheila replied in a Southern belle voice—having been briefed by John on James' love of hamming it up.

"You know, if you were a little younger, I might kick John to the curb. I always wanted a Southern gentleman," she whispered.

James continued to lead her by the hand.

"Well . . . then I will just have to lay the charm on a bit thicker to compensate for my advancing age."

"Thanks for the help, James," John called out as he struggled with Sheila's two suitcases and bag.

"Sorry John, you'll just have to manage without me." Turning to Sheila, he said loud enough for John to hear: "It's my heart dear, too much stress will kill me. And right now you have my heart pumping at about its limit."

Shaking his head, struggling to get the luggage up the stairs to the bedroom, John yelled back; "Laying it on a bit *thick* don't you think?"

"Positively not. Age does have its advantages in the laying on thick department," James said loudly, and then whispered conspiratorially to Sheila: "Come my dear, let me show you around. You didn't tell John about our little secret did you?"

"Of course not. You know I'm in the secrets business, don't you?" Sheila whispered back.

James rubbed his hands together like a little kid.

"We're going to have so much fun, even with John here."

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"I know. Wish we could get rid of him for a little while. He's such a bump on the log. Do you say that expression down here?"

"We do now."

John came back down the stairs and interrupted their conspiratorial whisperings.

"What are you two cooking up down here?"

"Nothing, dear. Just talking about how much fun we're all going to have."

"Just watch out for James. He looks harmless, but in reality he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. He plays that heart angle like a Stradivarius."

"I was just about to show Sheila the Beaufort Sentinel archives in—"

"I would love to see your grandfather's newspapers," Sheila interrupted.

"Great-great-grandfather," he said, taking Sheila's right hand in his left and leading her down the stairs, leaving John in his wake.

James went over the archiving system of Robert Campbell, his twice removed grandfather and founder of the Beaufort Sentinel. He and Sheila examined the very first storage box made of Camphorwood with the year 1828 stamped on its brass plate. He proceeded to show how his forebear devised an intricate shelving system and hoist, allowing for each storage box to be slid easily out of its rack and onto a wooden platform assembly that slid in parallel tracks on the floor, alongside the shelving unit. The top of the assembly had a long wire rope threaded over a pulley, extending down and coiled several turns around a large wooden drum with a handle. James explained to Sheila that by using the drum hoist—as he referred to it—one man could easily take down any of the storage chests.

Sheila took hold of the wooden assembly and moved it along the track toward the end of the row of shelves at the northeast corner of the basement. When she got to the corner she found intersecting parallel tracks along the adjoining wall. She moved the assembly along the east wall of the basement a couple more feet before coming to a stop.

James proudly interjected; "I built those tracks along the east wall when I took over the paper in 1970."

"I can tell," Sheila said, stopping to wipe her forehead. "It's

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much harder to push along the newer tracks.”

Feeling a bit chastened, James said in a soft almost inaudible voice, “Well I suppose after the new tracks are broken in for another hundred-fifty years, it will slide just as easily as it does along the old tracks.”

“I suppose.” Sheila’s gaze went from the tracks in the floor to the top of the racks in the northeast corner of the basement. She looked to the left, at the storage boxes along the north wall and then at the boxes along the east wall. She pointed to the boxes along the east wall and turned to James. “These are the storage boxes you started in 1970, right?”

“Right. The ones along the north wall go in order from 1828 to the year of my great-great-grandfather’s death in 1886. I started the ones along the east wall in 1970, when I took over.”

“And the ones from the 1970s are a bit lighter in color. *Correct?*”

“They’ll darken over time. I’ll be long gone by the time that happens, but John here—” James turned and looked at John. “If he continues on long enough, he may notice a change.”

“And you and your double g are and were very anal in your meticulousness, right?”

“Double g.” James smiled at Sheila. “I like that. From now on, old Robert is double g.”

John looked at the shelves of storage boxes along both walls, furrowed his brow and fixed his gaze on Sheila.

“You’re getting at something. What is it, She?”

Sheila walked up to the racks at the northeast corner and pointed up.

“There on the third row. See it? On double g’s rack is a newer storage box.” Moving her arm to the right, Sheila continued, “And adjacent to it, on James’ rack, is an older storage box.”

With a disappointed look on his face, James said, “John? How could you be so careless?”

John, in mock protest replied, “Don’t look at me. My research on the removal of the Cherokees only took me up to 1835.”

In a hurried penguin-like fashion James waddled over to the beginning of the archives, his face a mask of concern, growing redder with each step. James scanned each row and moved down the line, as Sheila and John looked on amused.

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A little more than three-quarters of the way down, James suddenly stopped and turned to John and Sheila. "Over here . . . 1865 and 1866 are in reverse order."

John and Sheila walked over to James. John put his hand on James' shoulder.

"There's an innocent enough explanation for that. 1865 was the end of the Civil War and the year of Lincoln's assassination. Probably years ago you looked at that period and simply reversed the two."

"Not very likely," James replied, giving him a hard stare.

"I would be inclined to agree with John, if we didn't have the new and old box mixed up at the corner," Sheila said. Turning abruptly, she walked up the stairs. "C'mon fellas, we need a drink."

James looked at John and shrugged. "Never argue with a lady."

## CHAPTER 17

The editor's office of the Sentinel was small but cozy, with wide, well-scarred oak plank flooring. Opposite the door, in front of the window, was a large old, oak desk—in use since the 1920s. A stuffed eagle stood perched at one corner, standing watch. James comfortably settled himself into the high-back leather desk chair, arguing once again that age did have its benefits, few though they might be. John and Sheila sat opposite James, in mission style oak armchairs. Wooden slats ran down the backs and under the wide flat armrests. Fitted on the bottom of each chair was a well-worn, black leather cushion. Between the chairs sat a small table, large and high enough for John and Sheila to place their drinks on without having to contort themselves. Along the wall to John's left were two mission-style mahogany bookcases built by the Globe-Wernicke company circa the 1890s. Cheap in its day, these stackable cases featured beveled glass fronts that swung up and under the top of each case, and were now quite expensive. On a table along the other wall sat a bronze replica of Remington's bronco buster. Above Remington's idealized version of a cowboy astride a rearing horse hung an oil painting of a cypress swamp; a lone man in the foreground paddled a canoe down a winding narrow canal. In the background, on a small sliver of land, the figure of a black woman stood in front of a cabin; smoke curled skyward from its chimney.

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Sheila looked around the office, absentmindedly twirling her right index finger in a rock glass loaded with whiskey and ice. After a few seconds, she took her whiskey-soaked finger and stuck it in her mouth, and then slowly pulled it out, making a soft popping sound at the end.

Noticing both men staring intently at her with not-so-subtle leers, Sheila said, "Enjoyed that, huh?"

She tilted her head back and poured the drink into her mouth, gargled loudly for several seconds, and then swallowed. Lowering her head, she gazed around the room a second time.

"Nice décor you boys have here. Early Norman Bates period would be my guess." She looked at James and then John before adding, "You guys done with your little reverie? I think it's time to get back to reality."

"Reality is starting to scare me a little," James said. "I think I much prefer watching a beautiful young woman drink. Don't you, John?"

"You're right on both counts as usual, James. But . . ." turning to Sheila, John continued; "we do need to focus on what might be going on here."

James spoke in a whisper, as if someone might be standing just outside the office door: "I don't even know if it's safe to talk about this here. The government was obviously censoring newspapers all across the country."

"James, that was almost two hundred years ago," Sheila said.

"The government didn't move those storage chests two hundred years ago," he replied, still whispering.

"You've got a point there. So what do you suggest we do?" John asked James.

"I don't know. I just feel confused . . . violated. Someone going through those storage chests has suddenly made me very nervous."

Sheila decided to try and lighten the mood a little.

"I've got it! We'll speak in code. Ifthey Hethey overnmentgay isay isteninglay, histhey illway riveday hemthey utsnay."

James looked at John, totally perplexed.

"I have no idea what she just said, do you?"

"Not a clue. Must be something they taught her at the NSC."

Sheila smiled. "It's Pig Latin. I said, if the government is listening, this will drive them nuts."

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John rolled his eyes. “Okay, let’s get serious now. I don’t think we’re in any danger looking into a man who has been dead for at least a hundred years. Whatever secrets the government is trying to protect, I don’t think it holds any physical danger for us,” John said, trying to reassure James, who seemed to be in need of some bracing.

John stood up and went behind Sheila’s chair, kissed the top of her head and put his hands gently on her shoulders.

“She, honey, is there any possibility that your inquiries may have tripped an alarm bell somewhere, and activated . . . I don’t know, seems silly, but some group within the CIA or the National Security Agency that has an interest in this?”

Sheila looked thoughtfully out the window that stood behind James.

“I’ve been running through my mind everyone I talked to about this. I figured if there was anything to this story, and if I talked to enough people, it might shake something loose. But I think the bigger possibility involves all the searches I’ve conducted on the computer. The NSA is basically just one giant eavesdropping organization. If there were any secrets to be protected, an alarm would be triggered by a keyword, like, Floating Man, Henri Richaud, et cetera.”

James now seemed a little more relaxed; following Sheila’s train of thought, he chimed in: “So what you’re saying is that by searching government databases using keywords, you may have triggered an alarm somewhere in the nooks and crannies of the intelligence bureaucracy and activated some part of that bureaucracy into action.”

“Possibly. But it doesn’t have to be a computer search. The NSA monitors every call, every cell phone, every email. They even listen in at thousands of public places. Assuming these keywords trigger an alarm, it could have been triggered when Rachel called us on her cell phone, or when John talked to Max, or when you called John at the hotel to tell him about Harriot Horry. In fact, that could be another one of the keywords programmed into the NSA network.”

“Who would be in charge of programming that into the network or database?” John asked. “Wouldn’t there be a department responsible for that?”

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“That’s the problem. There is no *one* department. There are literally hundreds of intelligence cells. Anyone of them has the power to hack into the system and program what they want for their own needs . . . totally unknown to the rest of the bureaucracy.”

“So what happens when one or more of these keywords triggers an alarm?” James asked.

“The conversation gets analyzed to see if it’s relevant. The owner of the cell phone or computer is identified and tracked.”

“*Tracked?*” James said.

“Yes, of course.”

Sheila removed John’s hands from her shoulders, got up and turned to face him, looking pale and worried.

“Once a caller or device is identified as being relevant, every call he or she makes is monitored. Every movement is traced via GPS chips that are in our smartphones.”

“Now I’m back to being scared,” James said glumly, slumping back in his chair. “In your learned opinion, Sheila, who is monitoring us?”

“James, I haven’t the faintest idea. That’s the beauty of intelligence agencies. Nobody knows what is going on. There are off-budget super-secret intelligence groups that hire other off-budget cells, all compartmentalized from each other. Some of these cells have no idea who they are working for or what their purpose is. They just get assignments, and money. The president, directors of national intelligence and the CIA all have plausible deniability if anything goes wrong, because they literally do not know what is going on. It’s like a self-perpetuating beast with tentacles that keeps growing and sprouting new tentacles, with no central direction or authority.”

With the revelation that an unknown, unseen hunter was possibly tracking them like game, the Floating Man and his amazing machine receded from their thoughts. As the midmorning sun crept into afternoon, the three of them sat mute, alone with their thoughts and libations.

## CHAPTER 18

The silence among the three was abruptly broken by Frank Sinatra's rendition of "Fly Me to the Moon."

John stared at his cell phone that sat on the table as Frank continued to croon . . . *on Jupiter and Mars*. Slowly, as if waking from a deep sleep, John reached for the phone. . . . *hold my hand*. He picked it up, saw Rachel's name on the screen . . . *baby, kiss me* . . . and answered.

"Hi Rachel, what's up?"

John put the phone on speaker and placed it on the desk. Sheila scooted her chair close, while John sat on the desk, and James leaned back with his eyes closed.

"A lot more of nothing that means something."

"How so? By the way, I have you on speaker so Sheila and James can hear."

"Well you guys are going to love this. It seems we have several institutions that have missing inventory when it comes to the dates we're looking for. This wasn't all done in the distant past—at least not at these libraries."

Rachel paused to let the news sink in.

John took the moment to add, "We also have some news on our end, but go ahead."

"Alright . . . I got a call from Vincent Silver. He's the curator of

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newspapers and periodicals at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. I sent an email request asking that he look at several South Carolinian newspapers with dates corresponding to the missing sections. Anyway, Vincent called, a bit perturbed. Said that the papers we requested were missing, along with several micro cards that they use instead of microfilm. He was *really* upset that several original newspapers were gone.”

“Is he sure? Maybe they just got misplaced over the years.”

“Nope, he’s very anal, just like your friend, James. Sorry James.”

“That’s alright,” James said, “anal doesn’t bother me.”

“Me neither, James.” Sheila leaned over and patted James hand.

After the laughter died down and the color in James face returned to its normal pink complexion from the reddish purple hue it had taken on, Rachel continued: “Vincent said he completed an inventory of all nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals a month earlier. There’s no way he could have misplaced them. He seems to think that maybe we had something to do with it.”

“I guess in a way we have,” John said.

Sheila quickly leaned over the phone to speak, putting her hand out in front of John as a stop signal.

“It seems we have very little to show for all our research and running around. Just a lot of missing articles and newspapers. I don’t see much point in continuing.”

“Well can’t you dig a little deeper using *your* sources?” Rachel asked, unable to hide her annoyance.

“The short answer is no.”

Sheila could imagine the surprised look on Rachel’s face at this turn in the conversation. “Anyway, I don’t feel comfortable talking about all this right now. Why don’t we meet back in Washington next week and discuss it.”

Sheila nervously looked at James, then John, and made a zip-it motion across her lips.

“Alright . . . we can meet next week.” On a more hopeful note, Rachel asked, “What was the news you had, John?”

“Nothing really, pretty trivial . . . uh, we’ll talk next week. Bye Rachel, say hello to Max for us.”

Sounding puzzled, Rachel said, “Okay, sure. I’ll see you all . . . next week then. Bye.”

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After Rachel disconnected, James got up and said, “I need another drink. In fact, I think we all need another drink. We’re not very good at this spy business. We almost spilled the beans over Rachel’s phone, which is probably tapped . . . or whatever you call it in the spy game.”

“I bet all our phones are tapped, or whatever you call it in the spy game,” John said.

He and James looked over at Sheila.

“Why are you two looking at me? I’m just a staffer, for Christ’s sake.” Sheila got up from her chair. “We don’t need another drink . . . we need to get drunk.”

\* \* \*

They went over to James’ house, adjourned to the front porch swing and started in on a very expensive, twenty-three-year-old, single-barrel Kentucky bourbon that James had been saving for a special occasion. The skies turned a hue of silver and black. As they dulled their senses, a summer shower pounded all around—obscuring them from prying eyes.

## CHAPTER 19

Lying on his back, John awoke fully clothed late Sunday morning, amazed that he had only a slight headache. Lifting himself up part way on his elbows, he looked over at Sheila, lying on her side in bra and panties—snoring loudly. A bit of drool hung from the lower edge of her mouth, a tangle of brown hair covered her eyes. John gently brushed her hair back and watched her sleep. He thought of an old saying: If you think she is still beautiful in the morning when you wake up, then you’re definitely in love . . . or something to that effect. Maybe it wasn’t an old saying, but he was *definitely* in love, and he’d realized it from the moment he first saw her striding into the newsroom of the *Washington Post*.

While Sheila continued to snore away, John got up, showered, dressed, and fixed breakfast. He brought in a tray of scrambled eggs mixed with mushroom and onion, along with an English muffin and a glass of orange juice to his snoring beauty.

Snoring beauty awoke, rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and raised her head. She looked up at John through unfocused eyes. Seeing double, she closed one eye.

“Jesus, the room is spinning. I haven’t tied one on like that since . . . ever.” And she promptly let her head fall back to the pillow.

Within seconds she was snoring again.

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John smiled, grabbed half the English muffin and left the tray on her nightstand. It would give him time to do some grocery shopping, take care of some errands around town, and most importantly, think.

\* \* \*

John drove by James' house on his way back to the Sentinel. He pulled into the long circular drive. James gave him a slow wave from his front porch swing. John waved back, got out of the car and walked up the front steps.

"Still some coffee in the pot," James said as John sat down.

"No thanks."

John began gently rocking the swing. They sat quietly for a few moments. Breaking the silence, John said, "I think maybe we ought to back off of this investigation for a little while until we know what we're up against."

"It just seems so absurd. Why would somebody care if we found a few newspaper articles about a man who has been dead for over a hundred years . . . even if that man did discover a technology that would be advanced by today's standards?"

"I don't know. And whatever it is that we don't know, maybe they don't know either. Or maybe they don't want us to discover what they do know."

John rocked the swing a little harder.

"And who are they? Another mystery?"

"Well James, I think it's safe to say that whoever they are, they're listening in on our phones and monitoring our computer."

"If this is some sort of secret cell of an intelligence agency wouldn't our homes be wired with listening devices and wouldn't they have one of those GPS tracking devices on our cars? How far does it extend? Or am I just being a bit too paranoid?"

"Maybe we're collectively spooking each other. I suppose there could be an innocent explanation for the misfiled storage chests and the missing inventory. But then again, given everything we know, the best explanation is that we're being eavesdropped on because we stumbled onto something we shouldn't have," John mused, failing to convince himself he was overreacting.

"Maybe someone is hoping we discover something, lead them to something," James said. Slapping his hand on John's knee, he

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added, "Give it a rest on the rocking."

"Sorry. I guess at this point we just have to assume that our every move is being followed. I don't think it's being paranoid to assume for safety's sake that everything we say on our phones or even inside our homes is being recorded and analyzed. I think it's prudent not to talk about this inside your house, the office, or on the phone, until we find out."

"How would we find out, without them, whoever *they* are, finding out also?"

"I've been thinking about that problem and have an idea that might work. But I need to talk to Max face-to-face . . . in Washington. Find a safe place. Until then, we should be completely paranoid and avoid talking about this anywhere."

"What about here on the front porch swing?"

Both men laughed, but the conversation from that point on avoided any mention of missing newspapers, Henri Richaud, or government conspiracies.

## CHAPTER 20

Late in the afternoon, Sheila finally got up. She ate cold scrambled eggs and took a bite out of the soggy piece of English muffin from the tray John had left. She took a long languorous shower with the water as hot as she could stand, and then right before getting out, cranked the water all the way to cold.

Goosebumps broke out over her body. She toweled off and slipped into one of John's bathrobes hanging on the back of the bathroom door. The robe fit her five-foot-eleven frame perfectly. She tied it loosely so that the front was not completely closed, showing off the plunging cleavage of her large shapely breasts—a touch of areola peeked out on the left.

She admired herself in the mirror while combing back her long brunette hair and tying it into a ponytail. She smiled, remembering how people at the *Post* thought she was such a snob, so aloof from everybody else.

Most men were afraid to approach her, to treat her like a normal person—so intimidated by her looks. The ones that did were usually just jerks hoping to score.

Women, on the other hand, shunned her and saw her as a threat. Even hated her in some instances. They were always cordial in a stiff, formal kind of way, but they never included her in any activities where the girls might get together and talk about their

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husbands or boyfriends. She always heard about parties after the fact. Never invited; she thought women took a perverse pleasure in telling her how much fun they had had at these get-togethers. As a result, her life before John had been very lonely and sex starved.

She thought about the first time she met John. She immediately sensed he was different. Stiff at first, and a bit standoffish like most of the men she encountered, John loosened up once they began to work together. In fact, he even apologized, confiding that he initially didn't like her and thought she had obtained her position through her looks. In return, she confided in John what a detriment her looks and figure could be.

At first he didn't believe it, until she did an experiment and proved it to him. She told John to watch their coworkers' reactions as she loaded the copier and pretended to fix a jam. One by one each of their male coworkers stopped and watched, as if under a spell, as Sheila bent over to pull the tray out and load a couple reams of paper into the copier. Her simple movements had the opposite effect on female coworkers, who looked on in disgust.

She pretended to hit the copy button and acted perturbed when nothing happened. She stood up straight, placed her hands on her hips and took a deep breath, accentuating her large breasts and flat stomach. Then she scratched her head and looked puzzled. Right on cue, two of the biggest a-holes in the department made a beeline over to help her. As they arrived she pressed the copy button, turned around and said, "*All fixed,*" before striding back over to John.

She remembered how John had struggled to find a diplomatic response.

*"That was quite a demonstration of the . . . power of a large . . . of the feminine figure."*

She had immediately put him at ease with her quick response.

*"You mean I have big tits."*

John finally loosened up and replied, "*Magic tits. They attract and repel at the same time. Defying the laws of gravity.*"

From that point on they were totally comfortable with each other and could share anything without being embarrassed.

\* \* \*

By the time John finally walked through the door, Sheila was

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charged up, ready to unleash the passion that had been building up in her over the past two weeks and a day. Hearing John pull up she stood waiting inside the doorway for him, loosening the robe to allow a glimpse of her half-exposed breasts and well-manicured pubic area.

John immediately smiled and remarked on the heat in the office. He went to turn on the air conditioner but was blocked by Sheila. Quickly grabbing his hand, she half-led, half-pulled him upstairs to the bedroom. The cinch of her robe became untied as John trailed behind, his hand firmly in hers.

They entered the bedroom.

Sheila swung John around violently.

With his back to the base of the bed, she immediately grabbed him by the lapels of his shirt and ripped the top three buttons off, remarking tartly that he could finish the rest. She bent over, undid his belt and unzipped his pants, pulling them down sharply to the floor along with his boxers. Squatting down and grabbing the base of his fully erect penis, she bit down lightly on the head; her tongue, cushioning the bottom row of teeth moved back and forth on the underside of his shaft. She quickly withdrew, stood, and faced him—a wild look in her eyes. She put her hands on his chest and pushed him hard onto the bed, laughing at the shocked look in John's eyes as he scooted himself further back so his legs didn't hang over the edge.

"I've been waiting two weeks and a day for this."

With feline grace she hopped up onto the bed, kneeling astride and over the supine John. She let the robe fall from her shoulders, revealing her swollen breasts with their hard pink nipples.

"Are you ready for these?" she said, glancing down at her outthrust breasts.

"Are those fully recovered from our last encounter?"

"You tell me," Sheila said, bending over John. Her hands grasped the brass bar of the headboard; she swung her breasts side to side, slapping them across John's face, mashing them right and left, straight down, smothering him. She rose up a little, and John took the opportunity to grab both breasts. After much resistance from Sheila, he succeeded in pushing her back onto her haunches.

Sheila put her hands over John's, still cupped around her breasts, peeled them off and said, "Are my magic tits strong enough

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for you?”

“Too strong, I surrender. I’m your slave oh mighty warrior queen. What is your command?”

“Shut up and fuck me hard.”

\* \* \*

In a small windowless room in an old government building in Washington, the well-dressed man and woman from the Le Bon Café sat listening and watching as John flipped Sheila over and turned her onto her front, pulling her into him as she raised to meet him, propped on her knees and elbows.

The thin young woman with delicate features and short blonde hair looked on in disgust and fascination at the scene unfolding before her.

“Warrior queen? Magic tits? Who the fuck talks like that?”

“People say silly stuff when they’re in love, so what,” her partner replied.

The man with the crew cut leaned over one of the monitors as the woman used a toggle switch to zoom in on the genital area of John and Sheila. He looked away and addressed his partner, scorn showed on his face.

“Did you have to use up *all* the cameras in the bedroom?”

“I saved a couple for the rest of the house and office. It’s not like these bozos have a clue as to what they’re doing.”

“They look to me like they know what they’re doing,” the man said as Sheila changed position onto her side, lifting a long lean leg in the air so John could enter. John placed his right leg on the floor, allowing more leverage for thrusting. “What a body on that girl. She must have been a gymnast until her boobs got too big, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re disgusting, and so is she,” the woman said as they listened to Sheila moaning in the background, and watched as she grabbed John’s right hand and placed it on her left breast.

*“Squeeze that big titty. Push harder . . . that’s it, that’s it.”*

The woman zoomed in on Sheila’s reddening breast.

“Those magic tits won’t be so tough when I get through with them.”

“Yeah?” The man said, watching the action and getting aroused. “What will you do to her?”

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“I’ll scratch the shit out of her with my razor sharp nails, and punch holes in those big balloons and let some air out. Then when she’s holding those bleeding fun bags I’ll kick her in her fucking cunt.”

The man turned to his partner with a look of both puzzlement and fear.

“What’s with all the hatred? I know we sometimes have to kill people, but with you it’s genuine hate: men or women, especially women. Where does that come from?”

“You really want to know?” The woman continued to stare in rage at the lovemaking on the screen in front of her.

“Yes . . . I do.”

In a flat emotionless voice, with the sounds of passionate lovemaking as backdrop, she told the story of how she was raped by her dad from the age of nine until she was seventeen.

Then, the incident happened.

“My mother, who was beautiful like this fucking cunt on the screen, with the same perfect body, was the life of every party. Every man wanted her. I looked up to her as some sort of feminine ideal. Every night I would go to bed, rubbing my chest, praying for the tit fairy that never came. One night, when I was seventeen, my dad was raping me for the umpteenth time. I opened up my eyes—literally. I had always kept them tightly closed so I wouldn’t have to see the bastard’s leering face. But that night for some reason, I opened them and found myself looking past him, at the light coming from my bedroom door that was open a few inches. There behind the door, looking in with a gleam in her eyes was my mom. My mom! She had been watching all those years and did nothing! Nothing! I had been too ashamed to tell my mom what was happening, but she knew all the time. All those years . . . nothing.”

“And that is when the incident—”

“I killed them. When they were asleep I crept into their bedroom. I stabbed my dad first. It only took a few stabs, but the noise he made woke up my mom. She jumped on my back, screaming like a banshee. As my dad lay choking, gurgling on his own blood, my mother threw me off him. She stood there in front of me, naked, screaming; she started raining blows down on me. I stabbed her repeatedly but it seemed to have no effect. She kept screaming, *‘you fucking little cunt’* over and over again, hitting me in

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the head with her fists, and I kept stabbing her, but I guess the knife was just penetrating those big tits of hers and not hitting any organs. Finally, when I was about to pass out from all the blows, I managed to thrust the knife under her left breast and penetrate her heart. It got very quiet. She looked at me with a strange look, blood covering her body, running down that perfect body, dripping from her breasts, dripping down her ribcage, down her legs, and she just stood there for what seemed like . . . forever . . . and then a look of pure hatred crossed her face. I snapped out of whatever state I was in, and . . . I kicked her as hard as I could between the legs. And she fell over on her back . . . dead.”

## CHAPTER 21

On Monday morning, James escorted Sheila and John around town, pointing out historical buildings and adding little tidbits of local gossip. So much gossip, in fact, that it caused Sheila at one point to remark in her Southern belle accent, *“Why James, you’re just like an old woman.”* To which James had smiled and retorted, *“No, but I was married to one for thirty years.”*

Their little tour took them to the Campbell Museum on West Street. Remembering Sheila’s term for his very late descendent, James remarked, “The museum was founded by my late double g. It’s not the original building though. That was gone by the forties.” He led them across the sidewalk and was about to walk up the steps of the museum when he saw Elmer Gaskins out of the corner of his eye, standing to the side.

“Why Elmer, good morning to you.” Both men looked genuinely pleased to see each other.

“It is a good morning, isn’t it?” Elmer walked over to the trio and turned first to John. “Hello John, you’re up and about kind of early.” John had a slightly chagrined look on his face. Elmer turned his attention to Sheila. “And you must be, Sheila. James has told me all about your attributes . . . journalistic wise.”

Elmer, only forty, but looking sixty due to a perpetual two-day facial growth and oddly fitting blonde toupee, ran his eyes up and

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down Sheila before continuing. "I heard all about how you met John at the Post, and if you don't mind me saying so, I think you could have done better. No offense, John."

"None taken, Elmer," John replied.

Elmer's eyes stayed riveted on Sheila.

"Well, it was awfully nice to meet you, Miss Sheila."

"Yes Elmer, awfully nice." Sheila shook Elmer's extended hand, trying unsuccessfully to hold back a grimace.

"Well I better be getting back to those gutters. Better to be painting one than in one, right, John?"

Elmer gave him a wide grin, revealing yellow teeth that included a gap for a missing bottom premolar, next to the canine on the right side.

As Elmer shuffled off, John remarked sarcastically, "A delightful fellow."

"He used to be our version of Otis, the town drunk from the Andy Griffith show," James explained to Sheila. "I got him a job at the museum doing minor repairs: yard work and other odd jobs. He's pretty much cleaned up his act. From time to time he falls off the wagon and I find him passed out in some nook or cranny of the museum. But other than an acerbic tongue, he's pretty harmless."

Sheila's brow furrowed, remembering something. "Otis's last name was Campbell."

James paused at the top of the steps. "What?" he replied, with a look of mild surprise.

"Otis, the town drunk from Mayberry, his last name was Campbell."

"No relation," James replied. And ever the Southern gentleman, opened the door for Sheila.

Once inside, he introduced them to Maggie Jones, busily cleaning the front of a large glass case. Behind the glass, hung a beautiful bejeweled antebellum dress and a striking green morning suit with red velvet trim worn by the Southern aristocracy.

"I don't know what I would do without you," James said to Maggie, who glowed proudly in return.

Sheila thought she detected some chemistry between the two, and wouldn't have been surprised if there was something going on between them. After a few minutes of small talk, James tenderly put his hand on Maggie's shoulder and whispered something too low

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for Sheila to hear. Maggie's luminescent smile increased in wattage.

*Definitely an item*, Sheila thought.

For the next half hour, James shepherded them around the museum and its eclectic collection. He paused at a collection of Indian weaponry displayed along the back wall, near the far corner of the museum. Next to the display was a locked door that James pointed at.

"This is one of Elmer's favorite hiding places. A small storage room that he can lock from the inside." He turned to John. "You might find this interesting." James grabbed a spear off the wall and handed it to John. "That was used mostly for spear fishing," he continued while John handled the spear and examined the tip.

Sheila pointed to a long slender wooden pipe. "What's this?"

James took it down and handed it to Sheila. "It's a Cherokee blowgun made of river cane."

"Did they hunt people with it?"

"No, they only used it for small game."

James took down a small, elaborately woven quiver and pulled out a wooden dart. Showing it to Sheila he explained, "When the Cherokee wanted to hunt a squirrel or raccoon, whatever, they would place this dart in the pipe. This fluffy white fringe at the end is made of bull thistle down. It's soft enough to glide through the pipe but dense enough to block air from passing through. Powered only by lung capacity."

John hung the spear back on the wall and examined the blowgun.

Sheila looked up at James and asked, "Why so many artifacts from the Cherokee? They were primarily in the northwestern part of the state."

John answered for James.

"I started doing research on the Indian removal when I discovered that James' illustrious predecessor wrote quite a good deal on the plight of the Indians. As a matter-of-fact, he was a good friend of the Chief of the Cherokee tribe, John Ross."

"Follow me," James said. He walked along the side wall about a quarter of its length, stopping at a large portrait. "Here's Chief John Ross."

"He looks like a white man," Sheila observed.

"One-eighth Cherokee, elected by the tribe. The man saved a

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lot of lives when Andrew Jackson had his army march them over a thousand miles. You may have heard of the Trail of Tears. Once we solve this floating man riddle, John is going to go back to his research on the treatment of the Indians. Chief John Ross presented this portrait to Robert, sometime in the 1850s. He died in 1866. Framed next to it is an edition of the Cherokee Nation's newspaper, the Phoenix, from the first year of publication in 1828. The Cherokee didn't have a written language until 1821. A Cherokee scholar named Sequoyah developed an alphabet with eighty-six characters. Virtually the entire Cherokee nation became literate within the space of a few years. They had their own written constitution, courts, schools, paved roads, and modern houses. They did everything they could to fit in, including fighting on the side of the government, and this is what they got for all their efforts."

James moved a few feet down and pointed to a document behind glass in a large ornate frame.

"The Indian Removal Act of 1830: President Andrew Jackson's gift to the Indians. This is one of the original copies signed by Jackson himself."

"What a bastard."

"You're absolutely right, Sheila, what a bastard," James said, walking off.

\* \* \*

On Monday morning, John and Sheila found themselves on Fripp Island, pulling off Tarpon Blvd at the southeast end of U.S. Highway 21. Just a thirty minute drive from Beaufort, James had offered them his beachfront rental home, insisting the two of them needed to make up for lost time. With barely enough time to pack they were literally pushed out the door by James: John, in shorts and tee shirt; Sheila, stuffed snugly into a pink tube top and matching shorts.

John pulled the Marquis onto a long drive. They soon found themselves in front of a massive two-story, cream-colored stucco with green slate roof. A large deck wrapped around the oceanfront and sides of the home. Jutting out from the southeast corner of the deck was a gazebo that had a Sand Live oak at the center.

Stepping onto the deck, looking out at the ocean and secluded

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beach, Sheila remarked to John that this could not possibly be the right address.

“Only one way to find out,” John said as he slipped the key into the lock of a double sliding door that led to the large living area of the house. Pretending to have difficulty with the lock, John turned to Sheila with a disappointed look on his face.

“I guess you’re right, She. The key doesn’t fit.” And then, with a sudden startled look on his face John shouted, “Oh my God! Where did that pit bull come from?”

“Where!” Sheila screamed and jumped into his waiting embrace.

“Just kidding.” The key turned and the door opened.

“You didn’t fool me for a second. I just wanted a hug.”

Sheila gently bit the bottom of John’s earlobe, then blew sensuously into his ear and pulled back, looked longingly into John’s eyes.

“Right,” John said, and began to slide the pink tube top up over her breasts.

“Don’t you think we should go inside?” Sheila said breathlessly, not offering resistance as the tube top slid over her upraised arms.

“Why? We have our own private beach,” John said, bending over to pull down Sheila’s shorts, while she, now topless, worked on John’s tee shirt. Soon they were writhing around on the deck in passionate embrace, both silently thanking James as they made up for lost time.

\* \* \*

After their primal needs had been satiated and following a quick dip in the ocean, John and Sheila lay naked on separate chaise lounges, looking out at the gently undulating surf.

Holding John’s hand, Sheila turned her head and said in a soft tender voice, “Honey, why did it take you so long to come to me? You must have known I wanted you.”

John kept staring straight out to sea as he pensively answered. “I don’t really know. I’ve thought about it a lot, and the only thing that I can come up with is that I’m afraid of success, or happiness . . . or both. For some reason, that seems to make sense to me, but then again it doesn’t.”

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“Why would you be afraid of happiness? Of this? What we have right now?”

“Maybe I’m more afraid of losing it. It’s like back at the Post . . . after each big story, all the accolades, I would go into despair and drink myself senseless. I couldn’t face the fact that I would have to climb back up the same hill. What if the next story didn’t pan out? What if the praise stopped coming? Same thing with you. Sure, I wanted you the instant I saw you. Every man does. After we started working together I fell in love with the person behind the facade. But it’s better to be unhappy than miserable. If we had fallen in love back then and it didn’t work out . . . I don’t think I could’ve survived the pain.”

“We’re in love now, John,” Sheila said, gently fingering the palm of his hand.

“I know. And sometimes, in the quiet, it scares me to death.”

Sheila got up from her chaise lounge and moved over to John’s, swung one leg over and sat astride John. She bent over and kissed John gently on the forehead and held his head in her hands. “Look at me,” she said, staring with a determined look in her eyes. “I’m not going anywhere. So unless you have some weird sick perverted side that I’m not aware of, I’m yours for the rest of your natural life. So do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you have a sick perverted side that I’m not aware of other than being a little rough in bed, which quite frankly, I enjoy. So that’s it, that’s my perverted side. What’s yours?”

“Well, I do occasionally toss off to Victoria’s Secret catalogs.”

“Really?”

“Occasionally.”

“Anything else?”

“Field and Stream.”

Sheila doubled over in laughter and fell on top of John.

“Oh my God. You’re into sheep!”

“Elk, actually. Sometimes an antelope will strike an enticing pose and send me over the edge.”

After their laughter subsided and the midday sun began its rise, the two fell asleep on the chaise lounge: Sheila enveloped by John’s embrace—only to be awakened by a curious older couple who happened to be strolling along the beach, thought they might be

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dead and walked onto the deck to investigate. Or so they said.  
That was their story and they were sticking to it.  
As they left, Sheila turned to John.  
“Guess we’re not the only perverts on the island.”

## CHAPTER 22

The rest of the week was spent taking long walks on the beach, snoozing on the chaise lounge and making up for lost time. On one midnight walk, Sheila found a couple of loggerhead turtles laying their eggs. Unlike the older couple encountered earlier, she gave them a wide berth to ensure their privacy. On Wednesday they managed to get in a round of golf. John was initially impressed by Sheila's swing. Less so by the end of the round when he found himself losing by three strokes. It was little comfort to John that she had been on the women's team at UCLA. But aside from golf and dinner at the Beach Club, most of the week was just spent in and around the house, lying on their chaise lounges, reading. At the small general store a short walking distance away, Sheila picked up Patricia Cornwall's latest *Scarpetta* novel. John, under the guise of doing research for his soon to be, maybe someday book on the removal of Native Americans from their homeland, purchased *American Lion*, a biography of Andrew Jackson by Jon Meacham.

Thursday, after a light dinner, they repaired to their usual spots on the deck overlooking the ocean. With the sound of the rolling surf it was not surprising that they didn't hear John's cell, ringing on the coffee table inside. As darkness descended, they went for a swim and made love in the rolling surf. When John's cell rang a second time, the two lovers were caught in the silvery shards of

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moonlight that danced on the surf and cascaded over them, advancing and retreating to the rhythms of their love.

Back inside, they showered off the salt film and John became aroused again. In answer to Sheila's look of surprise, John confessed to popping a Viagra earlier in the evening. Thankfully, John climaxed just as both the hot water and Sheila were about out. It was almost midnight when they emerged from the bathroom, with matching ivory-colored Egyptian cotton towels wrapped around their waists. John headed for his cell phone—ringing for a third time. He reached it just as it went to voicemail.

John saw that Rachel called, Max also, twice after Rachel. He went to the front living room, sat on the sofa facing the ocean and checked his voicemail. Sheila joined him, stretching her feet across his lap. John had such an excited look on his face that it caused Sheila to rise up on her elbows.

“Honey, what is—”

John put his hand up to silence her.

Sheila studied John's face as he continued to listen to his voicemail.

He turned to her and put the phone down.

“It's Rachel, she found something big.”

“Aaand?” Sheila dragged out the word and rolled her hand for him to continue.

“She said she was researching Jackson's secretary of war, John Eaton, in the rare document section, and came across a document on the capture of Henri Richaud and his removal to Washington. She said it would blow our minds. She's leaving the library with a copy and will scan and send it as soon as she gets to Max's. That's probably what the next message from Max is about.”

“I thought we were at a dead end. This is so cool,” Sheila said, rising up to a sitting position, leaning over John and the phone. “Guess Rachel didn't listen when you told her to lay off the investigation.”

“You know Rachel. There's no stopping her once she gets ahold of something.”

John put his hand back up. The second message played.

A shadow seemed to fall across his face. He turned pale and put the phone down.

“It's Max. Something happened to Rachel. She's at George

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Washington Hospital. He said he's on his way there now.”

“Oh my God!”

Sheila put her hand over her mouth. Tears began to pool in her eyes. She searched John's face for clues as he listened to the last message from Max. She didn't have to wait long to confirm her worst fears.

John hit end, tossed the cell on the floor, his head fell to his chest trying to hold back tears.

He exhaled.

“Rachel's dead.”

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## About the Author

A graduate of Northwestern, William Crawford began telling stories at the age of five to his cousins late at night while on family vacations in the Great North Woods. This quickly progressed—if you can call two decades quickly progressing—to political satire. In 1996 the author created a parody on the OJ Simpson saga. *My Search for the Real Killer, not by OJ Simpson* became a minor cult classic. The author's real ambition was to become a novelist. Over the years he developed several storylines. Once he retired from his safety position in government he turned that ambition into reality. The result is the *Floating Man*: a mystery thriller that takes place in both past and present. Replete with psychosexual overtones, *The Floating Man* weaves historical figures and events into a story of love, discovery, ambition, greed, death, and redemption.