

The Gun Club

A Short Story by Bill Bungeroth



The Gun Club

By

William Bungeroth

"They say of a sniper's bullet that if you hear it, then you are safe, because it will already have passed safely by. It is the ones that you don't hear that do for you."

---Sohni

In the shaded surface, he looked at the dial on his Breitling Navitimer, closed the cap on it, and settled in for the wait. He was a former shadow man who had been living comfortably in the sunshine, but now, right now, he was back where he belonged amidst the partial darkness. Funny, he thought as he waited; he was at peace with himself. This was the way it always had been for him when he was on a mission: sitting, waiting, and in some perverse way enjoying the surroundings. A calmness permeated his entire being. He knew the adrenaline rush would come, but only after the target was neutralized, and he was executing his escape plan.

Each op had its own specific sine qua non depending upon the target, location, time of year, and weapon of choice. In the movies, the assassin is often portrayed as clothed in black from head to toe, with both his face and hands darkened. In reality, the true professional dressed to blend into his surroundings and had an alternative change of clothing for his preplanned exit if necessary. It had been a while since he had altered his appearance, too long, he thought to himself, as his outer camouflage gave him the access that he needed to complete his mission. He had volunteered for this assignment, only after a lengthy debate inside his head, rationalizing why he had to complete it. His only regret—it wasn't for God and Country. That and the fact that he couldn't share the kill with his fellow soldiers. Shrugging his shoulders, he shifted his body position and thought to himself, At least I'm back in the game!

Six Months Prior

"Chris, you sure you don't want me to drive you?" Sally asked as she looked around at the chaotic scene playing

out in front of her on the kitchen floor; the two twin toddlers, the cause of the chaos, were teasing the family dog, a flat-haired black retriever affectionately nicknamed Treaver.

Chris, watching another twin train wreck, responded with a laugh, "I've already called an Uber, and it's on its way."

"Where are you flying out of, O'Hare or Midway?" called Sally as she made her move to free the family pet from the twins' grip.

"O'Hare," Chris replied, glancing at his watch. "Gotta go." As he kissed Sally on the cheek and waved goodbye to the twins, Treaver, having escaped from his tormentors' clutches, followed him to the door. Grabbing his briefcase and a suit bag, Chris smiled at the only other male member of the family and said, "I won't be long, boy. Guard Sally and the girls while I'm gone." He closed the front door of his brownstone and headed down the steps toward the waiting car.

The flight to Vegas was on time, and the ride in coach wasn't bad. He had a window seat and his Mac, which was all he needed to shorten the flight. The reason for the trip was to meet a potential client whose current ad agency was under review. They were interested in Chris's firm's unconventional approach to moving product and building brand awareness, especially in the digital space. Chris started an award-winning shop from scratch and garnered the reputation of being one of the most creative agencies in consumer products goods. And now this midsized midwestern ad agency, if successful, was about to enter the big time. That is if he could convince Aker's CEO and chief marketing officer of his ability to scale up without losing their creative excellence. The potential payoff: a \$565-

million domestic advertising budget. His agency team had already made their initial presentation and delivered their creative suggestions to the client. It was down to three choices. Two were major ad agencies—the current agency of record based in New York and a powerhouse international agency out of Los Angeles. Two whales against a shark, and this shark could smell blood in the water.

Tomorrow's strategic meeting with the CEO and CMO was scheduled for first thing in the morning. Chris had hoped that his meeting would be the last of the individual gatherings, but in deference to the current agency, the challengers were requested to give their presentations first. Since the L.A. agency had previously done some outsourced work for the client, it was decided that Chris' firm would have the first meeting with the decision makers. The reality was that all of the contenders had successful and proven track records. Chris knew from previous experience that in the end, it would come down to personal chemistry—which of the three presenters could establish a connection with the decision makers in their allotted time frame and come away with the prize. In the arena of one-on-one business interactions, Chris felt he had the edge.

His competitive juices flowing, Chris called for room service once he got to the hotel and spent the next two hours reviewing his game plan. Both the CEO and Chris were entrepreneurs and, against great odds, had built their companies out of whole cloth. That was the connection. At 9 p.m., there was no further prep to be done; Chris decided he was ready for the confab. Confident and prepared, he left his room and headed for one of the ten bars in the hotel casino. Exiting the elevator, he asked the concierge where he could find the quietest bar in the establishment. As he walked toward his destination past the "lucky players," a

rueful smile appeared on his face as he watched the house and its gambling algorithms outwit those chance takers who were ready to give up their hard-earned money for one big payday. He actually considered himself a gambler, but one who played a higher-stakes game than was available at the gaming tables. He played the game of business, in which he occasionally had bet his entire net worth to build a successful and sustainable company.

To his surprise, the bar he entered wasn't garish at all, especially for Vegas standards. His eyes swept around the space, a habit that he had developed for survival in a previous life. He clocked five people, not including the bartender, seated throughout the room. Picking the farthest stool at the end of the bar where he could still see the entrance and two exits, he plopped himself down and waited to order a drink.

"A break from the action?" the lonely bartender guessed.
"What'll it be?"

"Let me have your best Oregon pinot," Chris said.

Before the bartender could acknowledge the request, a booming question shattered the quietude. "Wine? I thought you were a Bud man!"

Spinning around on his stool, Chris instantly recognized the voice as a massive figure headed toward him.

"Staff Sargent Jablonski reporting to duty," said the man as his beefy hand engulfed Chris's own paw before both engaged in a hug.

"Jabbo, what are you doing here?"

"Reporting for duty, Cappy."

No one had called Chris "Cappy" in a long time. His earned Army nickname was bestowed on him during one of his tours of duty in Afghanistan.

"Dam, Sarge, you look great. What are you doing in Sin City?" Chris inquired again.

"Business," Jabbo replied before calling out to the bartender, "two Buds, no glasses." Then grabbing the stool next to Chris, he said, "Buds for old times' sake. How long's it been?"

Chris thought for a second. "Seven—no, eight years. We left Kandahar on the same flight. You ever marry Rachel?" The wallet-size picture of the two lovers flashed before his eyes.

"Yep, married and divorced. Took me a little while to get my head straight after I got out. Found myself in our family business, heating, and air conditioning. And you, did you ever find that perfect girl? One that would put up with that ornery personality of yours?" he asked with that booming laugh.

Chris had forgotten how infectious Jabbo's laugh could be as he couldn't help but chuckle at the ornery personality statement. With the beers now in front of them, he picked his up and proposed a toast. "Here's to getting out alive."

"I'll drink to that," Jabbo said before downing his beer in one swig with his right hand while putting up two fingers for the bartender with his left.

"Easy big fellow," Chris quipped. "You planning to go through a case in one sitting?" He threw back his own Budweiser and paused. "You remember that girl outside of Chicago that I met just before our last tour?"

"Sally?" Jabbo asked as he tried to recall a mental picture of the chick with who Chris corresponded during their last Afghanistan assignment.

"The same one. Dated her for about two years while I decompressed and then we upped and eloped. Got two twin girls—heartbreakers—a dog, a house, a business, and one wife.

"Cappy, I always knew you would land on your feet. No doubt about it."

And there they sat reminiscing about their youth, the Army, and their lives.

"I've basically lost track of the guys. You know what happened to Suarez and Washington? I think they both had another four months to go when we left," Chris said.

"Unfortunately, I do," Jabbo said. "Suarez re-upped and was killed on leave in a suspicious hit and run in his old East LA neighborhood. Washington had a nervous breakdown and supposedly committed suicide. I guess you and I were the lucky ones."

Without saying a word, Chris reached for his Bud and clicked bottles with Jabbo, who looked around the bar before continuing. "I stayed in touch with Washington, and he told me he used to get nightmares about what happened that day in the valley. The faces of the innocent lying all over the village. I wish I could say that it bothered me as much as it did Washington, but truth be told, as soon as the next mission popped up, I forgot about it. Or I guess you could say I compartmentalized it, in 'shrink speak.'"

Chris waited for Jabbo to finish his soul-searching statement, then looked at his sergeant in the same way he

did eight years prior when he said almost the exact same thing: "An op gone bad, that's all there is to say. I interpreted the intelligence, and I gave the order to attack the town—that was me, not you. It just happened to be the wrong village, and the onus, in the end, is on me for not questioning the order in the first place. There's no doubt that I'll have to answer for our actions, most likely to a higher authority...if you believe in that sort of stuff. Look, we did a lot of good things during our tours. That was the one fuck up."

Jabbo looked at the beer in his hand and finally said, "We were imperfect human beings who they asked to fight in an imperfect war." Then took another swig before saying, "Besides, life is for the living. No regrets. Let's drink our beer and put it to rest."

Chris nodded and signaled to the bartender for two more cold ones. "No regrets."

They spent the next fifty minutes catching up on each other's lives. As it turned out, they were both successful businessmen, driven to succeed, but had also reached a point in their lives where what they'd been seeking they had achieved. It was now a question of how big they wanted their individual enterprises to grow.

As the conversation started to wind down, Jabbo asked Chris a question. "Do you ever miss it, Cappy...the juice, the adrenaline rush, you know, the sheer joy of accomplishing your mission in a professional way?" Jabbo phrased his question in an attempt to elicit a response as he watched for the slightest change in Chris's demeanor.

Signaling to the bartender that he had had enough, Chris pulled out a bill from his wallet and laid it on the bar. "On

me," he said, then took his time before answering Jabbo's question. Finally, when he was ready, he leaned toward his former sergeant and looked him straight in the eye. "Damn right, I miss it. Life and death in one breath. It can be relived, but it can't be recreated. We both know that."

"But what if it could....Would you be interested?"

Hesitating for a split second, Chris replied, "Maybe," then getting off his stool, he shook Jabbo's hand. "Great seeing you again, let's stay in touch. Got to call it a night, Sarge, major meeting tomorrow."

"Understood. I'll be in touch. Great to see you again, Cappy. Like old times." And with that last statement, he swung his stool back toward the bar and put up one finger in the direction of the bartender. Jabbo was coming down from his latest mission.

The agency had been on pins and needles ever since Chris got back from Vegas. The decision was supposed to be imminent, but a week later, no announcement had been made.

"I'm going to head to the gym and work out for an hour. Want a non-fat latte on my way back?" Chris asked his assistant, Holly.

Holly was on the phone and put up her hand for Chris to stop. "Yes sir, he's in the office. Let me put you on hold while I track him down. It should only take a minute." Holly turned to Chris, crossed her fingers, and said, "Showtime, good luck!"

Chris retreated to his office, closing the door behind him, and took the call from the CEO of Akers Products. He was on the phone for a long twenty minutes as the buzz spread around the agency that a decision finally had come.

Holly watched out of the corner of her eye as Chris hung up. Grabbing his gym bag, he headed toward his office door. Opening it, he dropped the bag and asked anyone within earshot, "You know where we can get some great Champagne?"

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," were the only words that Holly could articulate as the entire agency gathered in jubilation around Chris's office. When an agency picks up a major account—and Akers Products was beyond major—the impact on the staff was enormous, and they all knew it. Besides staffing up, those in current positions could see both advancement and monetary compensation, let alone the fact that they were now working for one of the hottest ad agencies on the planet.

About an hour into the celebration, Chris slipped away and returned to his desk. He wanted a few moments to himself as he texted the good news to his wife and parents. The enormity of what he had accomplished was now sinking in. He had started the ad agency with the simple goal of being creatively different, and he had achieved it by creating the type of ad campaigns that were too risky for the established firms to present to their clients. As owner and creative director of the agency, his bold approach to digital and traditional advertising was what made his firm stand out.

And now, the shark had become a whale. Kicking back, he reclined in his chair with both feet on the top of his desk. Damn, he thought to himself. What a ride. It was while

reflecting on the agency's business trajectory that he noticed the envelope on his desk. An invitation was shaped like a Glock 17 with his name in silver lettering on a black background. Hand-delivered—no stamp on the front—he held it in both hands, curious as to its content. Looking outward through his glass window at the non-stop agency celebration, he decided to open it.

Simple and clean with a font appropriate for the invite, the announcement was a Save the Date for a black-tie open house at The Gun Club. The address was in the River North neighborhood, near some of the tony athletic clubs. Chicago apparently was their latest repository for exotic weapons, the other three being New York, LA, and Dallas. Leaning forward in his chair, he studied the invitation. He hadn't fired a weapon in at least six years, though he still was a member of the NRA and had been since junior high when his dad took him hunting.

Now how did they get my name, he wondered, but before he could figure it out, he heard Holly's voice in the doorway.

"Chris...no work today," she chided. "I insist. Everybody wants to thank you. It's your and the agency's day to shine."

Chris smiled back at Holly and waved his arm to signal that he was coming. As he left his desk, he placed the invite, with an RSVP date, in the upper right-hand drawer. Walking toward the festivities, he heard a booming laugh from one of the agency's young account executives, which activated his memory tumblers. Finally, the combination clicked into place. The invite was through Jabbo.

Normally any invitation that he received he would share with his wife. But this announcement was neither for business nor charity. Looking into the mirror, he adjusted his black bow tie to his satisfaction, which completed his formal Armani look. Two weeks had passed since he had received the Gun Club correspondence, and now it was time to check it out. The formal wear was one of many changes of clothing Chris kept on the premises. He closed his office door behind him and headed for the elevators. At this hour, the executive floor of the ad agency was deserted, which was OK with Chris; he didn't want to explain where he was headed. He felt a little guilty about the excuse he had given his wife (a dinner meeting with a prospective client) because he knew she would disapprove of him firing a weapon again, even if it was for recreational use.

Arriving at the address on Kingsbury Street, the modern steel and glass building was not emblazoned with any logos for The Gun Club. The only visible sign he was at the right address was the art deco silver numerals on a black plaque. Upon entering the lobby, Chris was immediately checked in and encouraged to take the escalator. Stepping onto the second floor, there were multiple bars, canapés for the guests, and a rock-and-roll legends band supplying energy to the room. Chris hadn't been sure what to expect. Still, he was surprised to find the exquisitely decorated gathering room was near capacity. The crowd was younger than he anticipated, people in their twenties and thirties, with an equal mix of men and women. After he grabbed a drink, a tall woman in a black cocktail dress came up to him, glanced at his nametag, and asked, "Would you like a tour of the facilities, Chris?"

"That would be great."

The woman extended her hand. "Suzy," she said. "I'm one of the staff, specializing in weapons instruction. Let's start with the two bars and restaurants, then move on to the members-only area with locker and shower facilities. From there, we'll go to our weapons display showroom, where you can buy or rent almost any weapon of your choosing. And then, finally, to the piece de resistance, our shooting gallery."

"I'm sure the amenities are excellent, but if you wouldn't mind, I'd liked to focus on your weapons display and shooting gallery."

"By all means. Are you an experienced shooter, or are you new to the world of firearms?" Suzy asked as she used her key card to take them into the recreational armory.

"Experienced," Chris answered with a hardened voice that left no doubt as to his level of expertise. As he entered the arsenal, he was suddenly taken aback. Not unlike an exotic automotive dealership that displayed some of the most valuable vehicles in the world like Bentley, Lamborghini, Aston Martin, Bugatti, and Rolls Royce, where he found its equivalency in weaponry.

Suzy smugly observed Chris' reaction; it was the same for everyone who entered this area of The Gun Club for the first time. "Impressive, no?" she said.

Chris nodded his head as his eyes quickly downloaded the Colt Paterson first repeating revolver, then the rare AMC auto mag alongside the 45 caliber and 1911 style Kimber handguns. To his right was the McMillan TAC 50 long-distance sniper rifle, and next to that, the M4OA3. These and other unique firearm choices Chris realized were apparently available for members to train on and fire.

Reading Chris's facial expression, Suzy said, "The firearms are all available for either rental or purchase, or if you prefer, you could use your own weapon and store it with us in a secure area. In the end, The Gun Club is not a collectibles museum; it is a club dedicated to shooting and becoming proficient in your weapon or weapons of preference."

"Understood," Chris replied. "And what is the profile of those members taking up arms, if I might ask?"

Suzy had answered this question before, and depending upon who was asking it, tailored it to suit the individual. "Successful people who want a greater sense of security when they are out and about. These are turbulent times, and our membership reflects the society in which we live, though in our case, the more affluent side. Shall we tour the shooting gallery?" she said as she walked toward one of the three elevators situated on the far side of the room.

Chris had a couple of fraternity brothers who had become FBI agents, and they had conveyed to him the training they went through and, of course, the legendary Hogan's Alley tactical shooting range. Arriving on the basement floor, he found himself taking in a shooting gallery that was a cross between old school and sci-fi.

"A totally unique experience," Suzy said as the elevators closed behind them.

"I'll say," Chris responded.

"It's designed for both the recreational and the professional shooter." Extending out her right arm in a sweeping gesture, Suzy continued, "With the software we utilize, we can put a member in any situation he chooses, from target practice in its simplest form to a recreation of history like

the Old West to surviving a virtual rebel attack in Mogadishu. The choices are endless."

"I'll say," Chris repeated himself. "It's a video game with live ammo."

Two hours later, Chris was outside The Gun Club, waiting for his ride back to the office. As he reached into his tux pocket to check for his keys, his fingers felt a discreetly placed note that had been folded in half. Opening it, he immediately recognized the scribble. "One step closer to the action." It was signed "Jabbo."

The following day Chris joined The Gun Club, though he kept his membership to himself. It was like joining a rather expensive country club, where most members couldn't break 80. At The Gun Club, there were very few low-handicap shooters. He didn't tell Sally or Holly about his firearm activity, opting instead to use the facility at various times during the day in the same way he used his fitness center. Shooting, like golf, was addictive; how low could you score in golf compared to how close a shot grouping could you achieve with the weapon in hand. The great equalizers: for golf, the course rating, the elements, and your opponent; for shooting, your surroundings, time frame to be executed, and the opponent and his defenses. The difference was that with golf, Chris played on an actual course against real opponents. At The Gun Club, he fired his various weapons against digitized targets.

After about a month and a half, Chris checked in his M4OA3 at the armory window and headed for the lockers. It felt great to fire a weapon again, even if it wasn't in defense of his country. After he showered and started to

change into his street clothes, he noticed a note inside his locker on the top shelf. Curious as to its contents, he opened it and read the following. "Target practice is fine for others, but if you would like to step up, the stakes call this number for further instructions." His immediate thoughts ran to Jabbo and his prophetic comment in Vegas. But what if it could? Would you be interested?

He left the note in his locker for close to two weeks before taking it out and finding a secure spot to make the call. The voice on the other end at first appeared detached.

"Chris Young?"

"Yes."

"Just a moment."

A new voice took control of the conversation. "Mr. Young, I was expecting your call. I propose we meet at a place where we can talk. I'll be in touch," and then the line went dead.

Which is how Chris now found himself at Winston's, a favorite of restaurant obsessives. It was in the newly renovated section of the South Loop, and at this hour of the day, the place was closed. Instructed that the side door would be left open, he quickly entered. Looking around the room, he saw it was empty, but next to the far-right wall, there was a table for two, a bottle of J.D., and a glass with three cubes in it. Sitting in one of the chairs that gave him command of the room, Chris poured the Jack over the rocks and sipped his favorite drink while he waited.

Five minutes later, from the kitchen, came a man with a bottle of Perfusion pinot noir in his left hand and a wine glass in his right. He was the same height as Chris, a little

over six feet, but about fifteen pounds heavier than the 175 pounds that Chris carried. Balding, he had a cherubic face and a neatly cropped beard. Moving the chair back with his right foot, he placed the objects in his hands on the table while gracefully sitting across from Chris.

Chris was the first to speak. "You own this place?"

Pouring the small-vineyard wine into his glass, he swirled it then sipped it. Smiling satisfactorily, he answered, "Silent partner," as he put his glass down and leaned forward in his chair.

Not wanting to mince words, Chris put the folded note on the table, opened it, and didn't say a word.

"I'll get right to the point," the man said. "For shooters like you, we have another level at the clubs. One in which you get to experience a thrill like no other, unless, of course, you've served, and then it's the opportunity to feel that exhilaration again. There is a modest initiation fee, and there are substantial cash prizes that are distributed for the best prep and shot throughout the year."

His eyes were fixated on the speaker as Chris raised his glass and took a long pull of the Tennessee sour mash. Slowly putting his glass back down on the table, he said, "You have my attention."

"I thought that would be the case. The Shooters Unit is recruited from those members of The Gun Club who we feel could benefit from a more stimulating experience."

"Who's we?" Chris asked.

Smiling back at Chris, he ignored the question and continued talking. "Each candidate for the Shooters Unit is

carefully selected. Invitations are by recommendation only, and performance is rewarded. Assignments are doled out to the Shooters Unit, and they are graded on their target preparation and execution. The assigned targets are determined by a group of individuals who you will never meet. All, and I mean all of the targets, have been vetted and deemed unworthy to breathe the air that they currently pollute."

Not surprised by what he heard, Chris slowly formed the words in his mouth before asking, "Your Shooters Unit is an assassination circle?"

"If I may continue, each shooter will receive a dossier on their potential target and will submit a plan as to how they are going to execute the kill. The plan will be approved, and a date and time will be determined. Once the kill shot is made, a digital photo will be transmitted via the dark web to confirm the kill. The weapon you will use is called an Earp. It's a cross between a Barrett 50 and M4OA3 built on the Remington 700 platform and can easily be broken down and assembled. The sensation of shooting the Earp will be the same as if a real bullet rifled its way down the barrel; a retort and sound will undoubtedly be heard by the target and, in some cases, his bodyguards. Extricating yourself so as not to get caught will be the final hurdle. The Earp records a digital photo at the precise date and time agreed to and transmits the image via the net. It is a step above The Gun Club's digital shooting gallery."

"So the assassinations are not really assassinations, simulations?"

A sly grin crossed the speaker's mouth as he casually looked at his Rolex watch. "Not entirely. There is always a round chambered in the Earp, and though the digital shot

is what you are taking, there have been a few, and I emphasize a few instances where there has been a misfire, and the projectile has left the Earp and hit the target." The speaker delivered the practiced line matter-of-factly then continued. "The Earp is not perfect, and there are occasional live fires, but to be honest, they are rare occurrences. Besides, the targets are reprehensible human beings, as you will discover from their dossiers."

"I see," Chris said in a noncommittal voice. Shaking his head slowly up and down, he repeated himself, "I see." Quickly ascertaining that the target selectors also controlled who got the photo or the bullet, he carefully looked around the room to make sure no one was within earshot then jokingly asked, "Any chance in participating in the target acquisition? I know a few morally corrupt politicians I wouldn't mind eliminating."

The speaker conspiratorially smiled back but didn't acknowledge Chris's question. "Here is a burner phone. If the answer is yes, call the single number in contacts. If not, throw the phone away." And with that, the meeting was over as the host got up from his chair. "I'll let you see yourself out, Mr. Young," he said as he turned and headed toward the kitchen.

Chris threw down the rest of his Jack and made his way to the exit, already having started a vigorous debate inside his head about the moral pros and cons of participating in the Shooters Unit. He was about to once again go down a rabbit hole, and even the pull of his family and business could not stop him from falling.

Chris executed the "Yes" call the same week he had an important meeting with the CEO of Akers Products. His agency was on schedule to scale up for the newly acquired CPG account. And Chris was knee-deep in balancing the firm's productivity of their existing accounts (the ones that made the agency) with the flood of inquiries that were coming in for their services since their reputation had skyrocketed.

Tuesdays and Thursdays were Chris's Gun Club days. After a vigorous shooting workout using both a Glock 17 and a Barrett 50 in the Mogadishu virtual gun range, he felt good about his firearms proficiency as well as where his company was headed. Opening his locker, he spotted the manila envelope, and rather than checking its contents there, he threw it in his leather satchel and headed back to the agency. It wasn't till most of the staff, including Holly, had left the office that he retrieved the envelope from his locked desk drawer. He pulled out another disposable phone and looked to be an extensive file containing detailed records and movements of one C.W. Forrester, a media mogul with various global business enterprises.

He was aware of the name by reputation, at least what his P.R. department had crafted for public consumption, but he also knew him from personal encounters. However, he couldn't immediately recall how as he thumbed through the dossier. Then he remembered—Sally knew his third wife. Both served on the same charity organization, and he had sat at the same table with the Forrester's when Sally was active with The Art Institute. Racking his brain, he remembered that C.W. was pleasant, not garrulous by any means, and self-centered. He also recalled that he came out of nowhere to be one of the wealthiest men in Chicago. The question was how he got there. The dossier revealed it was not by hard work.

After an hour of reading, Chris closed his eyes and listened to the classical music that had been playing in the background courtesy of WFMT, 98.7. The file was, to say the least, deeply disturbing: from money laundering, to sex trafficking, to the elimination of direct business rivals through any means available. If it was illegal, Forrester's fingerprints were on it, and his alleged associates' bios were almost worse than his. Looking at the target's photos spread across his desk, the social ones, taken of him attending various charity galas, bothered Chris the most—they showed a phony pretending to be what he wasn't. The more the photos captured the man, the easier it was for Chris to commit to the digital assignment.

There were about a hundred photographs to review, and as he started to assemble his plan, one photo caught his attention. It was taken at a lakeside resort where Forrester had both a summer home and luxury boat and where Chris had vacationed when he was single, in Saugatuck, Michigan. Unlike Chicago, Forrester's security detail was cut in half while visiting his summer retreat. Putting his elbows on the top of the desk and his hands in a way that mimicked praying, he pressed his lips against them and started to conceive a plan that, if timed properly, just might work.

"Chris, what possessed you to rent a house in Saugatuck? You know I always wanted to go there since I was a little girl," Sally exclaimed with delight.

Chris steered their SUV onto I-94. He had jumped on the Dan Ryan Expressway from their house and headed eastward toward the Skyway Bridge, leaving Illinois behind as he entered the Hoosier state. With a heavy foot, he

estimated that it would take them under two and a quarter hours to reach their vacation destination in today's traffic.

"I don't know, since I've been working non-stop after winning the Akers account, I thought that we could all use a little break to reconnect," he said. Glancing backward as he finished explaining his reasoning for the trip, he noticed that the three passengers in the back seat were already sound asleep, with Treaver wedged in between the two car seats restraining the twins.

Sally, giddy like a little girl, started to reel off the places her friends had told her about but never experienced. "Once we get checked in, we'll put our bathing suits on and head to Oval Beach, then afterward we can grab a drink and a snack at the Mermaid. The restaurant looks out on the Kalamazoo River. Then while I hit the stores, you can take the twins for ice cream at Kilwin's. OK?"

"Sounds like a plan," Chris responded.

"How big is Saugatuck?" Sally asked.

Now in Michigan, Chris was just exiting I-94 for I-96, which hugged Lake Michigan's Eastern Shore. Accelerating as he merged onto the final highway leg, he responded.

"Saugatuck has 1,000 residents year-round and north of 3,000 vacationers in the summer.

"You sound like a native," Sally said. "First shopping stop for me will be the Santa Fe, a cute women's store." She clapped her hands together with glee in anticipation of the trip. Then while Chris listened, she listed the stores and restaurants she planned to visit during their stay. Taking a breath, she asked, "I see you brought your clubs. Is there a course nearby?"

"Clearbrook Golf Club, it's five minutes away from where we're staying. You know I can't sit on the beach all day and do nothing, so I figured that while you and the girls were sunning, I'd play some golf."

"As long as you drop us off at Oval and don't forget us, I'm good with that," she said as she returned to her Saugatuck tourism link on her cell phone and looked for other places to explore.

Chris glanced over at Sally and then back on the road before he softly said, "It will be a fun trip and a chance to relax." Though the relaxation part was strictly for Sally's benefit. He was on a mission, his plan having been approved by those who sent him C.W. Forrester's dossier. Both the speed of the vehicle and his mind were racing as he continued to go over the details of his plan and his options. The Earp was now concealed in a special case Chris had made that fit out of sight under the SUV.

The next day, Chris, as usual, got up before everyone else and walked Treaver. Their rental home secured through Airbnb (thanks to Holly) was located on Holland Street in the Saugatuck Historic District. As was the case each morning, he grabbed his keys and let his canine companion sit in the back seat of the SUV while he headed for Uncommon Grounds, the coffee shop on Hoffman Street downtown. It was always packed, even at this hour, but to his trained eye, there were more people than usual as he pulled up to the entrance. As he climbed the steps, four muscle-bound gentlemen in summer attire gave him the once over. Chris immediately recognized them as C.W. Forrester's security detail. Breezing past them, he entered

the store. And there he was, standing right in front of him: the target, waiting like everyone else for his cup of java.

"Next," came the command from one of two baristas manning the cash registers.

With a swagger, Forrester walked up to the counter and placed his order. "Two large non-fat lattes, one with sugar and one without." He was at least six foot three and twenty pounds overweight. He wore a tan straw fedora, a white Ralph Lauren linen shirt, tan R.L. shorts, and Teva sandals. To his right, positioned inconspicuously, was the fifth bodyguard, the head of the detail. Like his associates on the front porch, he wore a Tommy Bahama Camp shirt over his white summer trousers. Chris's guess was that his weapon was concealed in the small of his back since the front of his shirt hung loosely over his pants. He had the look of ex-military as his gaze quickly fell upon Chris. Determining Chris not to be a threat, he shifted his focus toward the front door, constantly wary of the next coffee aficionado to enter the store.

After placing his order, Chris found himself standing side-by-side with Forrester. The two were brought together by destiny and their shared morning addiction. It was then that Chris saw in the flesh what he had failed to notice in the photos of the recently destroyed dossier—Forrester's cruel smile.

C.W., aware of the positioning of his PPD (personal protection detail), looked at Chris then looked away. Something must have clicked, because while the barista was calling out his name for his order, he looked over at Chris and said, "I know you, right?"

Surprised, Chris took a moment to respond. "Yes, our wives worked on the same charity event."

Looking like the cat that swallowed the canary, C.W. nodded and said, "Ex-wife. Yeah, you own an ad agency in Chicago. It's Chris, right?" Not waiting for an answer, he turned to get his coffees before saying over his shoulder, "Never forget a face." Then nodding at the head of his security detail, Forrester double fistfisted his coffees and headed toward the exit.

As Chris received his own order, he heard the roar of two-armored black SUVs pull up in front of Uncommon Grounds, stop, then accelerate as they made their getaway. It might have been Chris's imagination, but it seemed like the entire coffee shop took a collective sigh of relief at Forrester's departure. Evil, Chris knew, was a force, and it had definitely been in their midst.

For the next two days, everything went as planned—that is the Saugatuck vacation plan that Sally had outlined. Today, however, was Chris's day to golf.

"What time are you going to play?" Sally asked.

"Around 1 p.m.," Chris said nonchalantly. "I thought I would take the three of you to Oval Beach around noon and then pick you up between four and five if that works. Not sure I'll play a full eighteen."

Looking at her watch, Sally said, "Let me get some food into the girls, and we should be ready to go around 11:45."

"OK. I'll take Treaver on a long walk before we head out," he said as they both swung into action.

The drive to Oval took about ten minutes as they circumnavigated Kalamazoo Bay to get to Perry Street. Securing their day pass, Chris, dressed in his golf attire, parked the car and walked with the family onto the beach and set them up on the sand. The weather was in the high 70s, and the water was calm and 73—another great beach day on Oval. Kissing Sally and the girls goodbye, he made his way back to the SUV and headed for Clearbrook. When he arrived, the golf club parking lot was packed.

Inside he paid for his green fees for eighteen holes and then asked how long the wait was.

"About thirty minutes at least," came the brusque reply from the man behind the counter.

Walking outside, he gave his ticket to the starter, who ripped it in half and said, "Lots of foursomes in front and behind you. I could sneak you out as a single if you'd like."

"Perfect," Chris replied as he slipped him a twenty and headed for the first tee with his minimalist Sunday walking bag.

Once he completed the first hole, Chris looked around on the green, made sure he wasn't being observed, and then took off for the nearby woods. He had walked the forest trail three weeks before on his last trip to Saugatuck. It led back to the parking lot, where he emerged from the tree line and threw his clubs into the car. Pulling out of the lot, he started down Clearbrook Drive before turning right onto a side road. Putting the SUV in park, he changed into a service outfit with grey slacks and a light blue shirt that now had his new name above the breast pocket, "Fred."

Opening the driver's door, he grabbed two stick-on decals hidden in the back of the SUV. Moving quickly, he put one

decal on the driver's side, under the window, and the other on the passenger's side. Both read "Fred's Handyman Service." Underneath the faux business name was a bogus phone number tied to a throwaway phone. Ready for his departure, he pulled a dark blue ball cap from under the front seat and placed it low on his head. His disguise complete; he shifted the SUV into drive and pulled back onto Clearbrook Drive. Fortunately, no one else was on the road, so he headed to Blue Star Highway and turned left.

It took Chris less than ten minutes to get on the other side of Kalamazoo Bay and onto Park Street. As soon as he passed Saugatuck Yacht Club, he started to slow down to look at odd address numbers. He had reached his destination in less than a minute: a rental home that looked across Kalamazoo Bay and faced downtown Saugatuck. Driving down the tree-lined gravel road, he was confident that no one was there. He parked the SUV behind the free-standing garage and then walked up to the front door and took the key from under the mat. He then turned the key to the left and pushed the door open.

"Fred's Handyman Service," he called out as his voice echoed through the empty house. Good, he said to himself. He had rented the home for the entire week, having used a disposable phone to communicate with the owner. It was late in the season, and a prepaid cash payment left in the mailbox the previous week was enough of an inducement for the landlord (who didn't have to record the transaction) to rent the house without proof of I.D. or a more formal payment process. Who said cash isn't king, Chris thought as he walked toward the back of the house and looked out at The Butler restaurant through the sliding glass doors in the kitchen. The rental was three stories high, and with his workman's gloves on, Chris made his way up the stairs into the master bedroom. There he opened another glass sliding

door and looked out over the deck onto a magnificent view of Kalamazoo Bay. Confident that his shooting sightline was perfect, Chris started to close the slider before he looked up at the sky; it was beginning to cloud over, though the sun was still shining through.

Chris then retraced his steps and went back to the garage, where he reached under his SUV and released the container carrying the Earp. Opening it up, he looked long and hard at the digital rifle. Then leaving the Earp in its case, his hand reached for and pulled out a second weapon, a Barrett M99 single-shot bullpup long-range precision rifle, where the action and the magazine are far behind the trigger group.

Reentering the house, he once again headed for the third floor landing and reopened the glass door. Cautiously he entered the deck. In the shaded surface, he looked at the dial on his Navitimer, closed the cap on it, and settled in for the wait. He was a former shadow man who had been living comfortably in the sunshine, but now, right now, he was back where he belonged amidst the partial darkness. Funny, he thought as he waited; he was at peace with himself. This was the way it always had been for him when he was on a mission—sitting, waiting, and in some perverse way enjoying the surroundings. A calmness permeated his entire being, though he knew the adrenaline rush would come after the target was neutralized and he was executing his escape plan. Forrester would be arriving at his slip across Kalamazoo Bay in approximately twenty minutes. For this leg of his trip, traveling from Lake Michigan down the Kalamazoo River, C.W. would have his captain navigate the waters. The skipper would then pull into the Singapore Yacht Club's double slip with the boat's stern facing Chris's lair. Once settled in, the crew would order food from The Butler while the yachting party continued dockside. Four

black SUVs and their armed drivers were now strategically parked in front of the berth, waiting for their master to arrive.

C.W.'s magnificent home in Saugatuck, off of Lakeshore Drive, overlooked Lake Michigan. It was an impenetrable fortress guarded by PPD personnel, a sophisticated electronic security system, and four Doberman Pinchers. Gaining access to it was impossible. Instead, Chris used various dossier elements to construct a plan and then followed it up with two visits to Saugatuck about three weeks apart. Going into the office on weekends to work on the Akers account was his excuse to Sally and the girls while he followed Forrester's every move. It came down to yachting and Forrester's love of Lake Michigan. It was his only security weakness, and although his PPD had been trained to walk in and out of potential shooter sightlines, they couldn't possibly erect a human shield to protect him on water.

On Lake Michigan from Memorial Day to Labor Day, every Wednesday through Sunday is how Forrester enjoyed the spoils of his criminal enterprise. Utilizing his hand-held binoculars, Chris looked northward up the Kalamazoo River for the outline of Forrester's 30-meter super-luxury yacht, a Benetti Delphino 95. Rotating his field glasses, he caught a flash of light from across Kalamazoo Bay. What the fuck, he said to himself as he pulled back and retreated further into the shadows. Cautiously he refocused his binoculars on where the reflective light occurred, but nothing stood out. Glancing at his Navitimer, he swung his binoculars up the river toward Mt. Baldhead Park, where the meandering Kalamazoo River began its straight shot into the bay. And there she was, keeping a low wake so as not to create waves. Forrester's captain was navigating the river as his

guests started to emerge from below deck. Forrester, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Able to stay focused, Chris didn't think once of Sally and the girls, his business, or his current life. He was now in the hunt, and his heartbeat remained normal as he crawled back toward the front of the deck, this time with his M99 in tow. He then opened up the bipod to stabilize the weapon and got into a prone position so that the majority of his body was obscured, though a portion could be seen from a higher vantage point. Realizing that there was nothing he could do about it, he accepted the risk.

Chris had struggled with taking an Earp digital shot versus eliminating the target. In the end, Chris made his decision based on Forrester's age, his cruelty, and all the years ahead of him if he wasn't stopped. Clearly, C.W. operated below law enforcement's radar, and whoever compiled his dossier knew things about him that no one else knew. Perhaps that's why they picked Chris for the mission, knowing that given a choice, there was no choice at all.

Clearly, the class of the waterway, the Delphino's fiberglass hull, and carbon fiber superstructure majestically made its way down the river. The front portion of the hull was the first to cross Chris's sightline, the Delphino having a lower deck that slept ten guests and five crew, and a main and upper deck that were playgrounds for drinking, dining, and sunning. Watching the prow cut through the water, Chris thought that the boat radiated improbity, just like its owner.

The crew was now positioned as the yacht headed into the mouth of Kalamazoo Bay. With his binocs, Chris followed the Delphino and watched with admiration as the crew worked as one docking her bow first. Forrester was obviously entertaining some business associates because

each male guest had a scantily clad woman attached to their arm. With the field glasses glued to his eyes, Chris looked one more time for that flash of light he thought he had seen earlier. Having carefully scanned the buildings from across the bay, he concluded that it was nothing. It must have been my imagination, he said to himself, pushing aside a nagging instinct and a sense of uneasiness at the corner of his mind.

Refocusing his efforts back on the Delphino, he took a shooting position behind the bullpup and looked through the NHS scope. He had made most of the adjustments earlier during target practice with the M99, but as a professional, he went through the procedure one more time as he sighted the scope on top of the bullpup for the kill shot. Having already taken the NHS scope caps off the front and the back of the scope, he eased his right eye behind the riflescope as he started to adjust the magnification ring at the back of the scope. Satisfied, he locked the mag ring down with his shooting hand before reaching for the top turret on the controlled elevation scope. Several clicks later, the adjustments were in place. Chris dropped his hand from the top turret to the windage turret on the right side of the NHS and turned the knob several mils until he felt confident that what he was seeking was spot on. That only left the parallax adjustment, which he used for distance. He had preset it for 1500 yards. Now he slowly clicked it down to 1200 yards. The whole process took Chris less than three minutes. Different weapon than Afghanistan, but the same procedure.

And there he waited. It was now 3:45 in the afternoon, and the Delphino had been docked for twenty minutes. Food from The Butler had arrived, and the guests were drinking and laughing after a fun day of boating, sunning, and below-deck extracurricular activities. Yet, there was still no

Forrester. Maybe he was ill or couldn't tear himself away from whatever was keeping him below deck, a woman or a business deal. By 4:15 p.m., Chris wondered if Forrester was even on the boat. Although he was in the shade, there was sweat on his brow; Chris guessed correctly that the temperature had risen to the high eighties.

At 4:30 p.m., he realized he had a ten-minute window, or he would have to scrub the mission and pick up Sally and the girls, although they were only five minutes away from where he was located. Barely audible above a whisper through clenched teeth, he said, "Come on, Big Man, show yourself." Whether his command or his plea were acknowledged, it was precisely at that moment that C.W. Forrester emerged from below deck holding hands with his current trophy. By her facial features, she looked Eastern European. C.W., like a king recognizing his subjects, mingled with his guests, a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other, kidding, laughing, listening, and cajoling with each and every one of them. The movement around him made it difficult for Chris to take an unhindered shot. The target wasn't being cooperative. It was now 4:40 p.m., and Chris still didn't have an opening.

Suddenly, to Chris's amazement and to the consternation of his PPD, C.W. took some champagne from a guest and proceeded to stand up on an elevated deck sofa to propose a toast. Chris could see his lips move through the scope, but his words were inaudible at that distance. Slowly Chris let his breath out and squeezed the trigger of the bullpup, his right eye glued to the eyepiece. The Talon 50 ball struck Forrester in the head, right between the eyes, followed by a loud thunderclap that resonated across the bay. The party was crashed as C.W.'s security detail drew their guns and looked from their side of the bay to the other where the

sound originated, waiting for another flash of light that was not forthcoming.

As was his habit, Chris smirked to himself as he confirmed the kill and said out loud, "Welcome to Hell," before nodding his head and closing the bipod on his M99. He was back in the game, and as he started to low crawl backward to the glass door into the open with his weapon nestled securely in the crooks of his arms, he instinctively looked toward the flash of light he had seen earlier. The elongated missile, a boat tail, hollow-point projectile struck Chris Young just below the left eye, killing him instantly.

"They say of a sniper's bullet that if you hear it, then you are safe, because it will already have passed safely by. It is the ones that you don't hear that do for you." The second small sonic boom of the day reverberated then faded across Kalamazoo Bay.

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