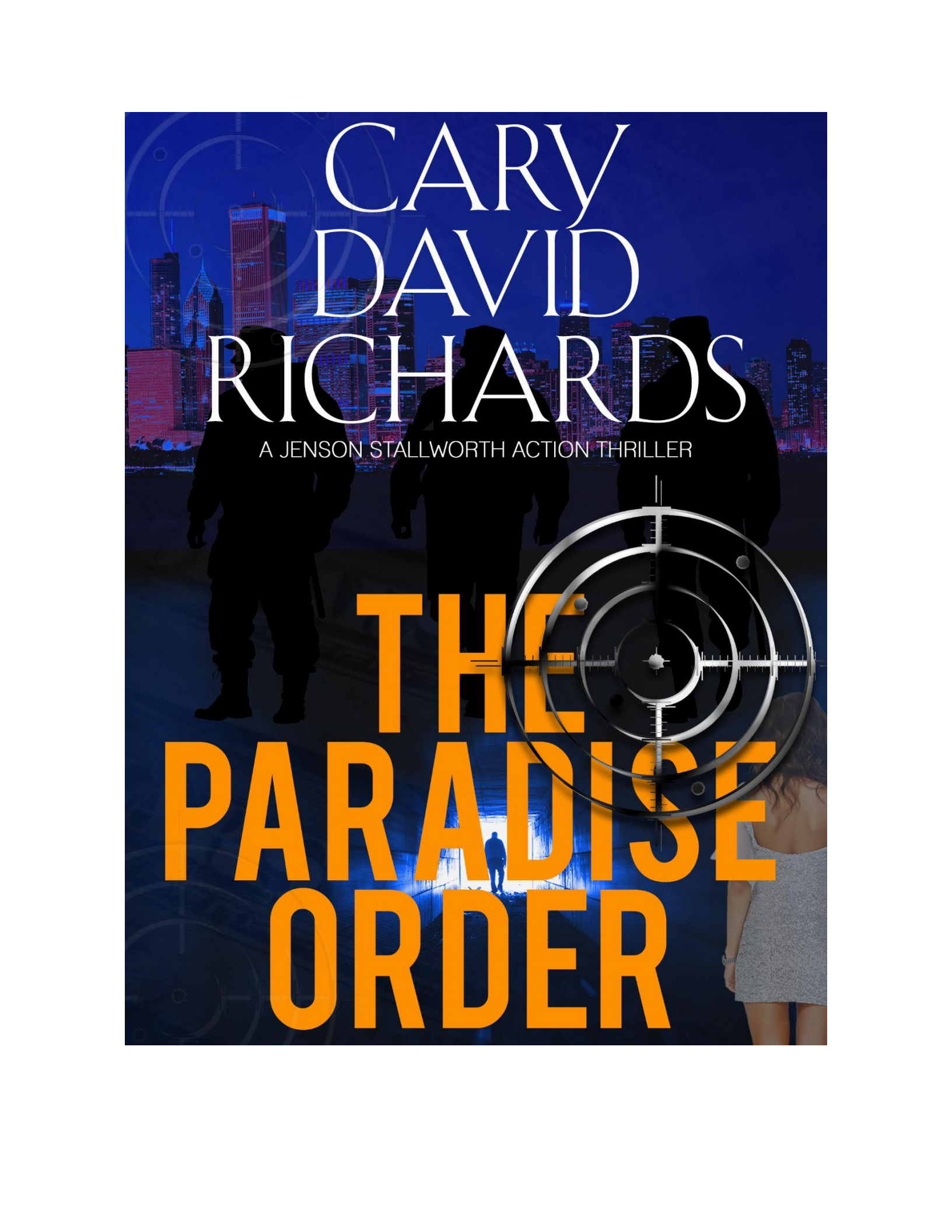




CARY DAVID RICHARDS

A JENSON STALLWORTH ACTION THRILLER

THE PARADISE ORDER

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A Jenson Stallworth Action Thriller

By

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Prolog...

One of the world's foremost experts at his chosen profession, Vladomir Soborski lay completely motionless in his Ghillie camouflage suit. The vicious predator blended perfectly into the tall grass that swayed in the light breeze near the top of a small hill while his cold, steel grey eyes scanned the scene below with laser precision.

Soborski had time to think as he lay among the weeds and insects waiting for his prey to appear. Careful not to let his mind stray too far from the task at hand, he wondered idly why killing never bothered him. Some of his associates were highly professional and efficient, they always got the job done, but afterwards they occasionally seemed bothered by the fact that they had just taken a life. To Soborski, it was simply a lucrative job at which he was very good and if you were the one on the wrong end of his favorite Russian made SVD Dragunov Sniper rifle, well then ... tough.

Life had not been easy for the tall blond man from Poland, especially early on. His drunken, unemployed father had disappeared for good when he was three. His mother, uneducated and strung out on heroine had turned to the streets. With a never-ending procession of sailors and drunken factory workers filing in and out of their cheap one-bedroom apartment, Vladomir was introduced to the ugly underbelly of life at an early age. By the time he was twelve, with his mother dead of an overdose, the tough, streetwise punk had already killed a man and found himself alone, struggling to survive.

The only reason he didn't end up in some dark hell of a polish prison was the fact that he had joined the army on a whim. Three square meals a day and a dry place to sleep being a substantial upgrade to his living situation. Barely making it out of basic training because of what was termed an "attitude problem" the young, hard-fisted recruit was spotted by an officer and identified as possessing a certain set of natural talents. The young malcontent was steered towards the Special Forces and by the time he was twenty-three, Vladomir was the top-rated sniper in the *Wojska Specjalne*, performing black ops all over the world.

Soborski, although appreciative of the training he had received, eventually began to chafe at the structure of the military. He resented taking orders from those he thought of as imbeciles. Finally, after a particularly nasty incident that occurred during a weekend leave in Gdansk that resulted in fifty thousand zloty in damages

to a local bar and left two military policemen in the hospital, he received a dishonorable discharge.

Finding himself highly trained but with no place to practice his specialized skills, the budding mercenary began offering his services to the highest bidder in a world that was only too glad to pay him handsomely for his talents.

Today, Soborski lay in his firing position finding it uncharacteristically hard to focus on his target. His partner of 20 years had recently and with no warning, announced his retirement saying that he just couldn't take it anymore. Ensconced in his firing position, Soborski felt that slow burn in his gut again as he thought about it.

"I want out" his partner had said, willing to turn his back on the money, the cars, the women, all of it. Well, that was just fine, all the more for Vladomir and his team.

"But he can't quit," Soborski thought, *"knows too much, could bring us all down if the wrong words fall out of his mouth."*

The assassin shook his head imperceptibly as he chastised himself. The first movement he'd made in hours. He knew better than to allow himself to lose focus while on a job. He'd worry about that weak son of a bitch later.

Vladomir lay concealed in flowing golden grass, hugging the sodden earth. At the bottom of the hill two hundred thirty-three meters away sat a farmhouse with several outbuildings. A blue Volvo station wagon and a silver Mercedes coup waited in front of an old barn. In the front yard spread a large oak tree, a rope hanging from one of the branches with an old tire tied to it. Smoke curled from the red brick chimney.

His extremities stiff from nestling into the cold, damp earth. The smell of dead leaves and mud wafted into his nostrils. Vladomir had been in position since before dawn. He refused to move a muscle as a beetle crawled down his sleeve and along the back of his hand. Now, close to 9:00 AM, puffy white clouds floated in a bright blue sky above the farm house. Right on time, the front door opened and a well-dressed man appeared in the doorway. The man turned and spoke to the woman wrapped in a bathrobe, her arms crossed against the chill of the morning. A little girl with unruly curls and a smudged face, probably from a hastily gulped breakfast, clung to the woman's leg. The man bent down and kissed the little girl's

forehead. He turned and, with briefcase in hand, walked briskly down the path towards the Mercedes.

The assassin's eyes narrowed, estimating wind direction and velocity by the smoke curling from the chimney. He stealthily reached up and adjusted one of the knobs on the weapon's scope. Then, with icy precision, he centered the cross hairs on the man's left temple. The man paused for a moment in front of the car door scanning the countryside as if he knew something wasn't quite right.

The professional calmly and smoothly squeezed the trigger.

Chapter 1 | Orange Jumpsuits and a Funeral for a Friend

Jenson Stallworth was arrested on a cold, blustery afternoon in January.

It had been almost a year since injuries from a serious crash had forced him to finally quit racing sprint cars for a living. With his talent waning, his often broken and battered fifty-four-year-old body seemed to be telling him it was over.

But fitting into the staid, work a day “real” world can be a very hard thing to do for an old adrenaline junky. Retirement planning was not something that had ever occurred to Jenson while living the gypsy life of a “World of Outlaws” dirt sprint car driver.

Tall, fit and greying slightly at the temples, Jenson had never had trouble attracting women or winning races. Lately though, his life seemed to be unravelling before his eyes. The most recent injuries had taken a long time to heal, and after he’d decided to step away from the cockpit, he’d come to the stunning realization that he was broke. The actuality of having to find a “real” job at his age had been hard to take. Untrained, and inexperienced at anything but sliding sideways at 140 mph, Jenson found himself not terribly employable.

Nothing seemed to quite fit. To Jenson, it almost seemed as though there was a running joke going on and everybody knew the punch line but him.

After several unsuccessful attempts to start a new career in the business world. The only thing he could find that he was even marginally good at was a commission-only real estate sales job and the high stress and long hours were killing him as sure as hitting the wall in his race car.

Today though, it wasn’t just his job or his rocky marriage or even the ever-increasing debt that bothered him. He had a secret and it was eating him up inside.

Jenson, lost in thought, left the office and headed home for lunch, thankful that his wife, Jamie would still be at work because lord only knew the last thing he wanted was to get into another argument with her. He just needed some alone time to think. As he turned onto the side street leading to his house, he glanced in the rear-view mirror and jolted to attention. He yanked the wheel to the left and punched the accelerator to avoid the pickup that zoomed up behind him. The evasive maneuver proved ineffective and the pickup rammed his car, crumpling his rear fender. Jenson jumped from his Toyota coupe enraged, the pent-up frustration and

anger that had been building since he retired from the race track bubbling to the surface.

Infuriated yes, but there was something else, Jenson couldn't shake the feeling that the guy in the truck had been aiming for him.

Swift thoughts ran through the back of his mind. *Could this be connected to Jeff Delucca's disappearance? Could he be on the Gulf Cartel's radar?*

"What the hell?" Jenson yelled,

A bald, swarthy man with a steely intensity in his eyes leapt out of the driver's side of the truck. Jenson saw something shiny out of the corner of his eye. A blade? A gun? Heading straight for him without slowing, the man said nothing and hunched his shoulders aggressively, a sneer creased his lips.

Jenson, no stranger to scrapes, knew how to handle himself. Middle age had not completely dulled the athlete in him, and over the years he'd been in jeopardy of having his ass kicked, or worse, by people who know how, on more than one occasion. So, when the man was just a few paces from him, Jenson got that old familiar feeling. His vision narrowed, everything slowed down. Suddenly a car squealed to a halt behind them, and a woman yelled out the window.

"He ran right into you! I saw the whole thing."

Startled, the swarthy man slowed and shot a glance at the woman. Jenson, still seething, coiled and let his right fist fly connecting solidly with the man's jaw. The man staggered backward awkwardly and then dropped to his knees blood spurting from the corner of his mouth.

"What are you doing!" the woman screamed. "Oh my god you hit him!"

The man struggled to his feet and staggered back to his truck. He seemed to be fumbling with something under his seat. Jenson tried to settle the woman down, but she was having none of it.

"Please ma'am it's okay, everything is going to be fine," he said, looking over his shoulder, trying to keep an eye on the driver of the pickup.

"Oh my god, you shouldn't have hit him. Why did you hit him?"

Suddenly, there were cops everywhere. One of them led Jenson to the grass berm beside the road. Several others corralled the swarthy man and took him to the front

of his truck. Jenson tried to explain what had happened while the first cop checked his I.D. The woman excitedly explained what she had seen to a different cop.

“Jenson Stallworth,” the cop said, almost to himself as he compared the picture on the license with Jenson’s face.

“I really think the guy was aiming for me.”

“Just relax sir,” the officer said, coldly

“And I think he had a weapon!”

“You need to settle down or I’m going to cuff you!” the cop said with more force.

It being January, although not raining for a change, the wind had picked up and Jenson was freezing. He hadn’t had time to grab his coat when he jumped out of his car.

He folded his arms in front of him and rubbed them up and down to try and stave off the bitter breeze as he bounced from one foot to the other wondering what the outcome of this dog and pony show would be.

Finally, one of the cops who had been talking on his radio walked slowly over to him and said, “Mr. Stallworth, please place your hands behind your back. You are being arrested for assault. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say...”

“What!” Jenson exclaimed.

The cop raised his voice. “Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney and to have an attorney present during questioning. Do you understand your rights?”

“But he ran into me!” Jenson yelled. “And I swear he had a knife!”

“Do you understand your rights?”

The cop who had been standing with him on the grass, a short burly guy with glasses, interjected. “Mr. Stallworth, there was no weapon. If you do not cooperate we may have to use force to physically restrain you! Do you understand?”

“Did you search his truck?”

“We have no probable cause to search his truck, sir,” the one in charge said.

“Wow!” Jenson thought. He could see that these guys had officially lost their sense of humor. He figured he’d better play along and try and figure it out as he went.

They handcuffed him and loaded him into the back of one of the police cars. His 6’ 3” frame folded like a lawn chair into the plastic back seat. He’d forgotten how tight the back of a police car was.

As they drove away from the scene Jenson glanced out the back window and saw the swarthy guy get into his truck. With the front fender smashed and the head light broken, it was damaged but still drivable. The man held a handkerchief to his bleeding mouth as he put the truck in gear and sped away in the opposite direction.

None of this was making much sense. Feeling a little like he’d swallowed a bowling ball, Jenson bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling. Trying to relax he took a deep breath and squirmed in the cramped confines of the cop car. Where had it all gone wrong? His life as a racer was over. The Real Estate job was a joke. The injuries, the debt piling up and now this. Getting arrested for assault was not going to help matters with Jamie. The relationship had been stretched close to the breaking point already.

But the thing that really made his gut churn was the secret. The information he possessed gnawed at him like a mangy dog chawing on a bone. The information he had learned a few months ago about his friend Jeff Delucca.

“*Orange is not a good color on me,*” Jenson thought as a skinny cop with a bad case of acne threw the folded jumpsuit onto the counter. “*At least everybody looks the same, but then I suppose that’s the point.*” He mused.

“In through that door,” the skinny cop grunted, pointing ahead and to the right. “Strip to your underwear, put the jumpsuit on and put everything else in the hanging plastic bag. Then come back here,” he said in a bored voice as if he’d uttered the same words a hundred times a day for years.

After Jenson changed clothes, the skinny cop led him to a holding cell full of guys that you wouldn’t bring home to dinner. One guy leaning against the wall in the corner had a bloody bandage over his right eye and a swollen hand. Two others who seemed to know each other, huddled in the other corner deep in animated

conversation. Thankfully, midday is not the busiest time of day to get arrested and there were plenty of places to sit. The holding cell in the basement of the court house consisted of three cement walls and a front wall of thick double paned glass. Wooden benches stretched around the interior. The heavy door made a metallic clang as it closed behind anyone new joining the party. Every time a new prisoner got added to the cell he would immediately make a bee line for the payphones that hung on the far wall, hoping to get a hold of someone on the outside to try and make bail.

Jenson tried unsuccessfully several times, then finally got through. Holding the phone away from his ear and wincing for several moments he let Jamie vent.

“Arrested! Now what? Jenson, this is the last straw I swear to god!”

She had enjoyed the life of a race car diver’s wife. Prancing around the pits in her tight jeans and high heels, swishing her long auburn curls as she looked back over her shoulder at the mechanics who dropped tools and gave low whistles. To her, it all seemed glamorous and exciting at the time. Things had soured considerably since he’d retired. It didn’t help of course that Jenson had a habit of occasionally running off with his friend Jeff to who knows where on a moment’s notice. He couldn’t blame her for being upset really. He had put her through a lot over the last few years.

“I should just leave your ass down there to rot!” she hissed.

“Sweetheart look, I know I screwed up but it’s not like you think.” Jenson tried not to sound too desperate.

“Not like I think? It’s never like I think. For two cents, I’d leave you there for a month. Maybe it’d teach you a lesson.”

Jenson looked at the floor and let out a deep sigh. “Honey, please. Can we talk about this when I get home?”

He finally convinced her to dig a thousand dollars out of their meagre savings and put up the bail bond. Hanging up the phone a wry smile played across his lips

“Guess I’m a better salesman than I thought,”

Several hours later, just as they were starting to gather the prisoners from the holding cell and take them upstairs into the jail for the night, one of the guards, a big hulking man with a sour expression, yelled, “Stallworth!”

Jenson had been sitting in the corner leaning against the wall with his eyes closed. He almost fell off the bench when the guard yelled his name, but a wave of relief washed over him when he realized that his ticket out of there had just been punched!

Jason said goodbye to his best new homies as they lined up and marched in one direction while thankfully, he was led in the other direction to the releasing cell. It took another hour and a half to cycle all the paperwork through and get changed back into civilian clothes. Finally, a big cop had him sign the last piece of paper and in a bored, gruff voice said, "Up those stairs and take a right."

Jenson didn't have to be told twice. Bursting out of the double glass doors of the city lockup and breathing the fresh air only a free man can appreciate, his predicament started to dawn on him. The whole debacle had started at around 11:30 in the morning. Now dusk, the wind spit rain drops at his face from the dark clouds rolling in off Puget Sound. No coat, maxed out credit cards and no cash.

It didn't matter. He was free! He decided right then and there that he hated being in jail worse than almost anything he could think of...

Jamie had arranged bail, but driving downtown to pick him up was clearly way beyond her ability to give a shit. Judging by the way she had reacted on the phone; his hunch was that he'd finally pushed her over the edge. He wasn't real sure she would even be there when he got home. In a way, it was probably for the best Jenson thought. They had never had much in common. The relationship burned hot as a match head for the first few months, based mostly on wild sex and alcohol. The excitement and glamour of the race circuit substituting for any real substance to the relationship. Once he'd retired from racing and began having real world problems she had gotten progressively more disenchanted.

"I guess the bus is my only option."

Jenson trudged the three blocks down the hill to the nearest stop. An hour later, he jumped off the bus a half mile from his house and started walking, his shoulders hunched against the bitter breeze and spitting rain drops. Turning up the long, steep driveway, Jenson noticed immediately that Jamie's car was conspicuous by its absence. He let himself in and there on the kitchen table lay... The note.

It read: "I can't take it anymore! You need to grow up and get a grip! I'll be at my sister's house. I want a divorce."

Crinkling up the note he shot it into the corner garbage can like a three pointer.

Well, I guess I'm on my own for dinner.

Within the week Jenson got fired from the real estate company because of the assault charge and got served divorce papers that would begin the process of ending his third marriage.

Unemployed and alone again. Not terribly upset about his marital situation, Jenson had been there before, and he knew he could figure out a way to generate some income. His biggest problem remained what to do with the secret he was holding about his friend, Jeff Delucca. Should he go to the FBI? Should he just keep it to himself and hope for the best? Or, should he give in and help, as Jeff had requested?

A few weeks after the divorce hearing, Jenson managed to find another Real Estate company that agreed to take him on. Maybe this time he could make it work. They scheduled him to fly to Chicago at the end of the month for training. To celebrate the new job, Jenson called his brother, Brad and told him to come over and they'd burn up some rib-eye's and get on the outside of most of a bottle of Jack Daniels.

He had just thrown the steaks onto the barbeque and smiled at one of his favorite sounds, that satisfying sizzle that occurs when meat first contacts a searing hot grill, when Brad drove up the driveway. Jumping excitedly from his pickup Brad ran to where Jenson stood proudly displaying his "Don't shoot the cook" barbeque apron and said breathlessly,

"Hey, did you hear about Delucca?"

Jenson's throat tightened as the long-handled spatula slipped out of his hand and clattered onto the patio.

"No" he said as he bent to pick it up. "What now?"

"Apparently, he was on his way up to Denali, but his plane never arrived in Anchorage. He was flying the coastal route all alone again. What a maniac. They're searching for him but they're pretty sure he went in the drink."

Jenson blinked a couple of times, then absent-mindedly turned and walked slowly from the patio into the kitchen.

“Hey, you okay?” Brad yelled at his back

Jenson dropped into the nearest chair and stared straight ahead for several minutes.

“Dude! The steaks are burning! What are you doing in there?” Brad yelled from the patio.

“My God Jeff, did you actually manage to pull it off?” Jenson whispered to himself.

A steel grey mist hung over the sodden, grassy slope of Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC. Less than a dozen mourners stood in the gloom clad in dark clothing and huddled under umbrellas.

Jenson had known Jeff Delucca since high school. Powerfully built with a square jaw, Jeff had jet-black hair, usually slicked back and even in high school, had a perpetual five o'clock shadow. Jenson had tried to teach him to ski once but gave up quickly, he was always more power and brute force than finesse and coordination. Great football player, not much of a skier.

After High School, Jeff joined the Army and eventually became a Navy SEAL. The strict discipline and demanding physical challenge attracted him to the role. Right up until the time he disappeared, he would spend several hours most days lifting weights. Jeff Delucca was a warrior. He was also the kind of guy who would give you the shirt off his back. Always ready to help or lend an ear. He was a good friend. Until recently, Jenson thought he could trust Jeff with his life.

Now he was dead ... Or, was he?

Jeff had always had a habit of disappearing for long stretches at a time and then showing up without warning, wanting Jenson to run off on some hair-brained adventure with him.

His work as a SEAL being highly secretive meant that not even his family knew where he was half the time. Then when he abruptly left the military shortly after winning several medals and serving with distinction in the 2nd Gulf War, he'd become more elusive than ever. Jeff and Jenson had drifted in and out of each

other's landscape for years. Always picking up as great friends right where they had left off.

Until that day last December.

The empty, flag-draped coffin sat forlornly in the mist as the minister droned on. Jeff's ex-wife, daughter and a couple of distant relatives that lived close enough to attend along with several men in uniform, stood lost in their own thoughts. Jenson, on the edge of the gravesite, began to shiver. He couldn't decide if it was the dampness of the oppressively grey day chilling him to the bone, or the mysterious circumstances surrounding Jeff's death.

As he stood in the rain and listened to the women weeping softly, he reflected on the genesis of this tangled state of affairs.

It had all started in the springtime five years earlier ...

Chapter: 2 | Cocaine, Mexican Beauties and a Washed-up Prize Fighter

Jenson and Brad were in the race shop leaning over the engine bay of the car Jenson would race in the upcoming season. Lacking budget once again, they were trying to wring enough power out of last year's engine to compete against some of the best teams in the country.

Sweat dripping off their foreheads and blood oozing from at least one knuckle on each hand. They focused like surgeons over a heart patient, when in through the open roll up door walked Jeff Delucca.

Jenson hadn't seen him in over a year. "*Lord only knows where he's been or what he's been up to.*" Jenson had learned a long time ago not to ask too many questions.

"Holly shit!" Jenson said as he looked up from the car. "Look what the cat just dragged in."

"Hey race pussy, what's happening!" Jeff said, a huge grin creasing his face.

The two men met in the middle of the garage and embraced roughly, Jeff pounding Jenson on the back several times. Then he walked over and gave Brad a fist bump.

"So, you been off saving the world for democracy or what?" Jenson asked.

Jeff's grin faded a little as he looked at his feet briefly.

"Yeah, something like that," he said. "Look, I've got several weeks off for R and R and I've got an idea."

Jeff Delucca's 'ideas' usually ended up with him and Jenson outrunning some poor woman's enraged husband or getting escorted to some state line and being asked not to return. Jeff was the only person Jenson knew that could get into more trouble quicker than he could.

Spring time always made Jenson a little edgy. With the racing season not yet underway, the only thing left to do was tighten the same bolt you tightened yesterday and worry about which competitor had made the most improvements to his car. Back then, Jenson had yet to meet Jamie. He was single and on his last nerve. He was ready for some action and Jeff had always been the one who could provide it.

“Oh my god!” Jenson said feigning exasperation. “Now what?”

“Well,” Jeff said, “I met this guy when I was in South America. He’s a retired prize fighter from Mexico. He has a Villa in a small fishing village right on the Gulf. He said we could come down and he’d take us out Sail fishing.”

Brad tried not to laugh as he strained to tighten a bolt, he knew Jenson probably couldn’t resist.

“He said we could come down?” Jenson said with a little skepticism.

“Yeah, it sounds great, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know Jeff, I’m pretty busy,” Jenson said. “We still don’t have the heads re-worked on this motor and we’ve got to re-build the rear end before the first race next month...”

Jeff knew he’d be interested though. Jenson usually jumped at the chance to get away. Especially in the spring time.

“Listen, I know you. I know you get all stressed out just before the racing season starts. You’re holding on too tight man. Come on!” he said. “Screw the heads! Bradley can take care of it, right Brad?”

He shot a glance at Jenson’s brother who was smiling ear to ear. Brad knew Jenson had already decided to go.

“C’mon Dude! I’ll pay for your plane ticket.” Jeff said, slapping him on the shoulder one more time.

“How long will we be gone?” Jenson asked looking sideways at Jeff.

Jeff cocked his head to one side and broke into a wide grin.

A day and a half later they stood in line at Seattle-Tacoma Airport waiting to check in. Jeff carried a large black canvas duffle bag as well as his regular bag.

“We’re only going for a few days,” Jenson said, raising his eyebrows.

“Oh, I never go anywhere without weapons these days. But I have to properly package them up and then check the bag to get them through security.” Jeff replied.

“Weapons? What do have in there a bazooka?”

“Don’t worry, it’s just a few hand guns. You know, just in case.”

Well, what would a Jeff Delucca vacation be without a little uneasiness Jenson thought.

Later that day, they landed at the General Heriberto Jara International Airport in Veracruz, Mexico. They had to change planes three times to reach the place, each one getting smaller and older the further south they progressed. Jenson let out a sigh of relief when they finally touched down at their destination. It always struck Jenson as funny how he—a guy who could take all kinds of chances on the race track—could be such a nervous flyer.

Jeff rented a car at the airport. Of course, there was no Hertz counter, so they ended up talking to an old guy with a scraggly beard and skin like leather, who said he had a couple of cars for rent.

“I hab 73 Ford wagon, de 68 Mustang with de no top, Tambien de Rambler do not run too good.”

“Wow, let’s take the mustang,” Jenson said.

“Great,” Jeff said, “we’ll take it.”

When they finally reached the parking lot and found the Mustang, they looked at each other and burst out laughing.

There stood a faded blue 68 Ford Mustang convertible. The right front fender carried a huge dent, and rust was eating its way up the hood. The left rear wheel was the only one with a hub cap attached. The convertible top had several large rips in it. They both shrugged and threw their bags in the back seat. Jeff turned the key and the aging small block V-8 roared to life. To both their amazement it seemed to run well enough.

Barreling down the two-lane highway headed south along the Gulf of Mexico, Jeff let the Mustang loose. They had the top down and his usually slicked down black hair was blowing in his face. Jenson found a rock and roll station on the radio.

With ZZ Top booming at full volume they whisked along the interface between desert and ocean. All seemed right with the world. As dusk gathered, the sun hung low in the cloudless blue sky. The flat desolate plane off to the right smelled of sage and mesquite. The ocean breeze off the Gulf, fresh and invigorating. The mixture intoxicating. They drove for several hours. In the waning light, the water became an unbelievably beautiful azure blue. Jenson leaned back, took a deep breath and drank it in.

Jeff turned and flashed his broad boyish grin.

“This is awesome!” he yelled over the wind, radio, and roar of the engine.

Jenson nodded enthusiastically, smiled back and gave him the thumbs up. Jeff was right. He needed to get away. A few days of fishing and voluptuous Mexican beauties would do him a world of good.

Night had fallen by the time they pulled into the sleepy coastal village of Alvarado. Dusty and timeworn the town consisting mostly of stucco buildings many of which, Jenson guessed, dated from the later part of the nineteenth century.

A canal cut its way in off the gulf and opened into a large lagoon. Old fishing boats along with a few fancier yachts pulled gently at their moorings along the decaying pier.

“So, tell me about your fishing buddy again?” Jenson asked as they wound their way through the narrowing village streets.

“His name’s Amado Ursa, he was the bantamweight champion of the world a few years ago,” Jeff explained. “Back in 1993, I think. Then, only a few months later he lost the title and he’s never quite been the same since. Don’t bring up boxing, he’s a little touchy about it.”

“Great,” Jenson said, winking, “I’ll be sure to make it a dinner topic.”

“I first met him in Nicaragua. He was doing some promotional work for a tequila company down there. He thinks I’m a private contractor selling temporary shoring equipment to the government. Don’t mention anything about my being an ex-S.E.A.L. either by the way. We’re meeting him at the Hotel Del Pastor.”

“Temporary what to the who?” Jenson said, furrowing his brow. “Oh, never mind, I don’t want to know, but suddenly there’s all kinds of rules about what to say or not say?”

“Occupational hazard,” Jeff said, flashing his grin.

Approaching the three-story stucco building in an older part of town just a block from the fishing wharf, Jenson thought,

“Both my exes would have called this quaint.”

“What do you think?” Jeff asked as they pulled up.

“Well... What’s a good fishing trip to Mexico without a dumpy hotel or two?” Jenson answered.

“Don’t worry. We’re staying at his villa, it’s going to be awesome.”

“You keep using that word. I wonder if your definition of awesome and mine match up very well?”

As much as he had wanted to go on this adventure and had enjoyed it so far, Jenson always felt a little leery of a Jeff Deluca planned ‘vacation.’ Jeff parked on the street, they got out and stretched, stiff from the long drive.

A man appeared at the top of the wide stucco stairway on the corner. Heavy wooden double doors lay just beyond. The doors, propped open, allowed loud Mexican music, shouts and laughter to erupt from the first floor Cantina. Light streaming out of the hotel lobby lit up most of the street, the only sign of life detectable for several blocks around.

“Jeffy!” the man yelled, outstretching his arms, a big cigar in one hand.

“Amado! You old son of a whore!” Jeff yelled back and ran up the stairs to greet the man. They embraced and shook each other by the shoulders.

Amado Ursa, a wiry little man in his early fifties wearing sandals and what looked like burlap pants stood on the landing as if he owned the place. A loose-fitting muslin pullover couldn’t hide his toned physique. He reminded Jenson of a coiled spring. Even in the baggy clothing he could tell the Mexican was all sinew and muscle. It seemed that at any moment he could explode into violence. He had an unruly crop of black hair, a thin moustache and a noticeable scar running along his right cheek. The wild, somewhat shifty look in his eye made Jenson distrust him right from the start.

“Amado, this is my best buddy Jenson,” Jeff said.

As they shook hands, Amado held onto Jenson’s for a fraction of a second before letting go, his dark piercing eyes seemed to be trying to bore into Jenson’s skull.

“Holla,” Jenson said weakly, coming out with virtually the only Spanish word he knew. He wasn’t even totally sure what it meant.

“Ahh, holla amigo,” Amado said.

As he spoke, the large cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth bounced and dropped ash onto his shirtfront. He seemed to accept Jenson for the time being.

“You come for the big fish? Eh?” he asked. “Tomorrow we get! Tonight, we drink.” He turned and waved them into the hotel entrance. “Come, come. I buy Tequila. This is Rolando,” he waved at a large shadowy figure just inside the door of the Cantina. “If you wait long enough he might tell you a joke,” Amado said over his shoulder laughing heartily.

As they walked into the old cantina, Jenson got his first good look at Rolando. A giant hulk of a man, with short cropped hair. Dark aviator glasses covered his pockmarked face. Jenson considered making a wisecrack about wearing sunglasses at night, but decided against it immediately as a chill ran down his back. Rolando said nothing. He didn’t nod or acknowledge their presence in any way as he turned and followed Amado, a decidedly unpleasant scowl creasing his face.

“Fun guy at a party,”

Strolling into the dusty cantina, the crowd of what Jenson assumed were mostly local fishermen, took no notice of them. The ancient watering hole had uneven wood floors and a large bar running across the back wall with a brass foot rest and high stools. A mariachi band played loudly on a small stage in the far corner. Jenson leaned against the bar and put his foot up on the rest.

“Hey look, I’m Clint Eastwood” Jenson whispered to Jeff.

As the evening progressed Jenson and Jeff both had too many shots of Tequila and were introduced to several gorgeous Mexican women. Jenson wasn’t sure whether they were there for fun or if they were working girls. As the group sat drinking, Jeff and Amado talked loudly, each jokingly accusing the other of being a rotten son of a bitch. Rolando stood behind Amado and said nothing. He was really starting to creep Jenson out. It occurred to him that Rolando was Amado’s bodyguard.

“Jeez, sometimes I’m a little slow on the uptake,” he chided himself.

As Jenson sat at the bar taking it all in, a young woman named Victoria sidled up next to him. The other women hanging around Amado although certainly attractive, all seemed hard and a little rough around the edges. Victoria had a sweetness and freshness about her. She had long wavy black hair, beautiful brown skin and big dark brown eyes. About twenty-eight Jenson guessed. She was very pretty but with a sadness behind the beauty.

“Hello,” Jenson said.

“Hello.” She spoke very good English it seemed.

“So... what happens in Alvarado Mexico on a Tuesday night?”

“Only things that Amado approves of,” she said rolling her eyes slightly.

“I see. Amado is kind of a big deal around here, I guess.”

“Oh, I’d say he’s the only deal around here.”

Jenson and Victoria chatted awhile, but he was tired and a little too drunk and wanted to get some rest. Finally, Jeff agreed that they should get some sleep if they were going to get up early and go fishing. Jenson said good bye to Victoria and mentioned that Jeff and he would be in town for several days and hoped that they’d be able to meet again.

“I’ll be here,” she said, and gave him a sly sideways smile and a wink. “Amado knows where to find me.”

Amado, Rolando, Jeff and Jenson stumbled out of the Hotel Del Pastor at around 1:00 a.m. Amado and Rolando piled into a beat up, old Chevy pickup and roared off down the narrow dusty street. Jeff threw Jenson the keys and yelled

“You drive!”

The two old friends vaulted over the side of the convertible without opening the doors. The engine roared to life and Jenson grabbed a gear, then mashed the accelerator. In a shower of gravel and dust, they began their chase of the old green pick up. As they bounced and lurched along the narrow uneven streets, it occurred to Jenson that Rolando, out of spite, was doing his best to lose the two gringos behind him. He, of course, had no idea who he was dealing with. Even with the Mustang sounding like it was running on seven cylinders, Jenson gained on and caught the old truck in no time. Sliding sideways through the intersections and hustling down the old streets of the village, Jenson turned and grinned at Jeff who tilted his head back and let out a huge, “Yaahooooo!”

Nearing the edge of town, they turned north and sped about six miles up the coastal highway back the way they’d come into town. Jenson had to hand it to not only Rolando but the old Chevy pickup as the speedometer inched towards 100 mph. Then Rolando braked hard, turned off the main road and headed east towards the ocean. Bouncing down a rutted dirt track for about five minutes before breaking through the dunes and onto a paved road, Jenson kept the old truck firmly in sight. Shortly, they arrived at the driveway of a stunning Mexican Villa.

About a hundred yards from the surf, the moonlight made the stucco walls glow soft pastel beige. The two-story villa had soaring leaded glass windows in the entryway above massive, ornately carved wooden double doors that must have weighed a thousand pounds each. The red tile roof glistened. Nestled into the perfectly manicured lawn on either side of the house, fountains splashed in unison with ocean. Jenson could just see the corner of the large swimming pool located between the house and the beach.

He turned to Jeff and said, “Wow! I think our definitions of the word awesome just got a little closer together.”

“Yah, I hope he’s got a weight room in there” Jeff said.

Typical Delucca, always worrying about where he was going to lift weights. They parked behind Amado’s truck, grabbed their duffel bags and followed him into the house, where it seemed they’d been transported to another world.

Jenson marveled at the contrast between the dusty old Hotel Del Pastor and this sparkling palace on the beach. It was resplendent with expensive marble floors, crystal chandeliers, soft lighting and overstuffed couches. He didn’t expect this from the little tough guy with the piercing eyes. Apparently, being a washed-up prize fighter paid pretty well in Mexico. Several servants scurried around as Amado barked orders in Spanish. Rolando had disappeared as soon as they arrived. For a big guy, he was certainly light on his feet.

Amado turned to Jeff and Jenson.

“Your rooms are prepared. Get some rest. To get big fish, we leave early.”

A maid appeared from nowhere. She turned on her heel and walked up the marble hallway. It took Jenson a second to realize that they should follow her. Jeff gave him a slight push from the back that woke him up.

Jenson’s room astonished him. A five-star hotel would pale in comparison. He didn’t realize people actually lived like this. He’d seen this kind of thing in movies and travelogues, but for a guy used to staying at Holiday Inns on the sprint car circuit, Jenson was dumbfounded.

The walk-in shower had white and brown marble walls and would have fit four or five people. The water came out of the walls as well as the ceiling. It took him five minutes to figure out how to operate the damned thing. Finally, with steaming water seemingly coming at him from every direction, he bolted from the shower

and ran giggling down the hall naked and dripping wet. Fumbling for his cell phone where he'd thrown it on the bed he dialed Jeff.

"Dude! Have you used the shower in your room yet?" Jenson yelled like a ten-year-old at a carnival.

"Oh my god, will you get a grip on yourself and go to bed," Jeff said in an annoyed, sleepy voice. Giggling like a school girl and letting out whoops of laughter Jenson padded back to the shower leaving wet foot prints on tiled hallway.

They were awakened by the staff at 5:30 in the morning. Jenson had to smile at the irony. The most luxurious room he'd ever slept in and he only got to do it for three and a half hours.

After a breakfast of orange juice, coffee and Mexican omelets taken on the patio facing the ocean, Jeff, Amado and Jenson climbed into the old truck. Apparently, Rolando didn't like to fish. Jenson, still fighting off the effects of the previous evenings Tequila indulgence, tried not to think about his headache as they jostled down the rutted track headed for the wharf. The sun began to show itself over the Gulf on the eastern horizon, the dawning of another beautiful day in Alvarado.

Amado's uncle owned the boat and was the expert fisherman. Amado just stood back and yelled orders in Spanish to the crew while he smoked a large cigar and drank expensive tequila directly from the bottle. It was clear from his attitude he was the man in charge. If Amado wanted something done, it got done.

Jenson couldn't help but notice that, if awake, Amado was either drinking, just finishing drinking, or getting ready to drink. He handled it pretty well though, never seeming to lose that piercing steady stare.

Jeff and Jenson each caught a Sailfish. It was an exciting experience being strapped into a chair while holding a large fishing pole on the other end of which a hundred-pound fish fought for its life. Back at the dock, they took the obligatory photos with the fish hanging from its tail showing its full six-foot length.

Over the following few days Jenson and Amado never really warmed up to each other, but they got along like guests at a party. Amado seemed to love Jeff. They

would laugh and tell stories for hours. Jeff about his combat experiences, and Amado about all the fights he had either won or lost. There seemed to be plenty of both. In the evening's, they'd all return to the Hotel Del Pastor Cantina and drink. Jeff and Amado played cards in the back room with some of the locals, Rolando always lurking in the shadows. Jenson, not a big card player, spent most his time getting to know Victoria, who was always there when they showed up. They had long conversations and danced to the mariachi band. She was sweet, and Jenson liked her a lot. On the second evening, as they sat close at the bar she said,

"I want to tell you something."

"Oh?" Jenson said.

"Yes," she said, looking down, suddenly kind of shy and vulnerable. "Amado ..."
She stopped and glanced around.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked softly, not wanting to press too hard but curious about what she was struggling to tell him.

"I mean," she said, "You know that, well ..."
She paused again. "You know, Amado pays us to be nice to the men he has staying with him sometimes."

Her eyes were beginning to well up with tears.

"Oh Victoria," Jenson said. "I know how it works. Don't feel bad."

"You don't understand," she said. "I don't want to be like that. I want to go back to school, I want to be somebody!"

She caught herself speaking a little too loudly and glanced around to see if anybody noticed.

"I know," Jenson said, catching a tear with his finger as it rolled down her cheek. "Listen let's just dance and have some fun. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"Thanks," she said smiling shyly. "Sorry I didn't mean to ruin the party."

"It's ok. Tell me more about what you want to study."

They sat close and talked for several hours. When it was time to go, she gave him a long hug and kissed him on the cheek. He told her he hoped they'd see each other the next day.

Later that night, Jenson lay in the softest most comfortable bed he'd ever slept in and was just drifting off when a muffled but terrified scream made him sit bolt upright in his bed!

Had he dreamed it? No! There it was again. A woman's scream.

The Paradise Order will be available for Purchase on a Pre-Order basis, In November of 2017 to get added to the mailing list and be notified when it's available (PLUS get all sorts of info, back story, prizes and other cool stuff.

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