



## CHAPTER I

*“FOR THE LAST TIME, if you’re hot, GET IN THE DAMN WATER!”*

Woodrow Salmon had heard enough. His wife’s temper had erupted before, but not like this—*never* like this. Feeling the stares of the people around him, he ducked his head and spoke in a hushed tone. “Look, I don’t think—”

“I don’t give a *damn* what you think!” Her voice was a jackhammer in a country meadow. “I’m *tired* of hearing it. I’m tired of *everything*. Don’t tell me how *hot* you are. Don’t tell me how *miserable* you are. Do you think *I’m* not miserable?” Her head looked like a swollen balloon. Her eyes spat green flames.

“Okay...okay, for God’s sake, I’ll go for a swim. Jesus, Claire, will that make you happy?”

He kicked off his sandals and hoisted himself up, his tacky skin tearing away from the lawn chair. Was this another disaster in the making? It wouldn’t surprise him. After all, his life had been one long string of disasters, until he met Claire, that is—and the jury was still out on that one.

Standing on wobbly legs, he stared at the Pacific Ocean, stomach gurgling. If only he had a second chance in life, a chance to go back in time, right the wrongs—*change* things. But then life didn’t offer second chances, did it? Not as far as he could tell.

Woodrow bent down and kissed his three-and-a-half-year-old twins on the head. “Be good for mommy. Daddy’ll be back soon.” The girls looked up from their juice boxes and smiled, adorable in their matching pink swimsuits and miniature sunglasses. They were everything to him, including the last meager thread in an unraveling marriage.

He shot a quick glance at Claire. She returned it with malice. He knew what she was thinking—that her husband was no trophy anymore, not by a long shot. And that he was getting harder and harder to control. Oh well, that was *her* problem.

Woodrow turned and headed for the water, tiptoeing through the endless checkerboard of bodies and towels. The sun was relentless, the air so thick he could chew it. Labor Day. What a horrible day to go to the beach! But Claire had insisted, and Woodrow, of course, had no say in the matter—in *any* matter.

As he made his way through the crowd, he noticed a brunette in a string bikini, a body builder rubbing suntan oil on her perfect shoulders. The pair belonged on a Bowflex poster. “Nice tan,” the beefcake uttered, mocking Woodrow as he passed, the woman giggling.

Woodrow couldn’t blame them for making fun of him. Among the bronzed bodies of Huntington Cliffs Beach, he was a rotting corpse, his oppressive work schedule allowing little time for outdoor activities. As a result, he’d let himself go, his once-athletic body carrying thirty pounds of excess fat, his rumpled trunk sagging like an old overcoat. He was thirty-seven but could pass for fifty, his dark brown hair receding badly, his clear blue eyes supporting bags and a lifetime of pain. Ten years ago, he was a handsome man. But the years hadn’t been kind.

As he reached the water, he watched three young boys constructing a sandcastle. The oldest packed a cup with wet sand to create makeshift turrets. His subordinates dug a moat, laughing with wonder as water filled their hand-sized burrows. Woodrow smiled, his mind flashing back to the times he’d spent with his own brother.

A shrill whistle brought him back to the present. He looked up to see a chiseled lifeguard on his perch, pointing out to sea. Woodrow’s eyes moved to the surf, where he saw hundreds—*thousands*—of swimmers dotting the watery horizon, tiny splatters of color on a pure blue canvas. Capturing the scene on video, a camera crew moved along shore, stopping here and there to interview random sun worshipers.

Must be a slow news day.

“*Jesus!*” An ice-cold wave numbed his toes. Cringing, he contemplated a quick return to the lawn chair, then remembered Claire. *No*. He would press on.

After waiting for just the right moment, he stepped forward, gritting his teeth and extending a foot. Arctic water sloshed over it, robbing him of more feeling, his body twitching violently. “*My God!*” Before he could move, a third wave surged past, lifting water to his waist. Woodrow heard himself scream like a teenage girl.

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IT WAS SALMON, ALL right. Tower thirteen right behind him, the swimsuit unmistakable—neon green with a pink circle on the ass.

The damn thing looked like a bull’s eye.

Delbert Oroso floated at the surface, scuba gear masking all points of identification. Silently, he watched through waterproof binoculars, eyes on the prize. His diver’s watch beeped 2:00. If nothing else, his client was punctual.

The man in the neon suit looked tentative. “Come on...” He tested the water, cringed, then looked over his shoulder. “...do it, you son of a bitch.”

Water rose to Salmon’s waist, his high-pitched scream deafening. Oroso felt the familiar tingle in his gut, the accelerated heartbeat, the wetsuit pulling tight against his crotch. Since that fateful day in ‘97—the day his life came to an end—nothing he’d tried—parasailing in Acapulco, bungee jumping in New Zealand, big game hunting on the Serengeti—had ever come close to the sheer, unbridled high of killing another human being. It was what he lived for now, the money a mere bonus. He’d clear a million dollars on this hit. And, yes, he was going to take it. But truth be told, he’d have done it for free.

After more than a minute, his naïve victim moved against the current, wading slowly and deliberately into the quick-deepening sea. Less than fifty feet away, the aroused killer replaced his mouthpiece. And reported to work.

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WOODROW STOOD ARMPIT-DEEP IN the restless water, numb from the chest down. As he peered into the icy depths, something caught his eye, something bright and shimmering. He squinted, failing to

recognize it at first. Then the realization struck him. He was looking at his own swimsuit. *Thanks, Claire.* Another fine purchase. Even through the murky saltwater, the garment was blinding.

As he reached down to tighten the waistband, another realization struck him. His body was no longer cold. He paused, mulling over this new development. The water actually felt comfortable now, the numbness in his limbs gone.

A reluctant smile pulled at his lips. Crouching down, he allowed water to spill over his burning shoulders. He listened to the waves, the crooning seagulls, the nonstop laughter of the joyous children. He filled his lungs with salt air, tasted hickory from a nearby fire. A slight titter escaped him. While his wife was roasting on the beach, he was relaxing in a cool, amniotic bath, out of her reach, beyond her control, away from her glass-shattering voice.

It was the closest thing to peace he'd ever experienced.

It wouldn't last.

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THE HUNTER CLOSED IN on his prey, gliding like a shark past kicking limbs and undulating kelp. He made no sound. He caused no panic. Only bubbles marked his unseen path, rising to the surface and bursting in the swirling waves.

Salmon was thirty feet away now, his trunks a neon beacon.

Would he put up a fight?

It didn't matter. Drowning a man was simple.

He closed to within twenty feet...fifteen...ten, his long, black fins stirring the water like hellish antennae, his erection pronounced. It was not uncommon for Oroso to ejaculate during a murder. For the hired gun, killing was pure ecstasy!

He checked his gauges one last time.

Five feet...four... *Yes! YES!*

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SOMETHING BRUSHED WOODROW'S LEG.

He looked down, but there was nothing there. It brushed him

again. “What the...” Visions of *Jaws* flickered in his brain, the serenity he’d found just moments ago gone, replaced by raw fear.

His body began to shake, his teeth to chatter. He told himself to move, to swim as fast as he could, but his limbs were frozen. Suddenly, the thing moved between his legs. “*Jesus!*” As if catapulted from a slingshot, Woodrow dove, arms flailing, feet kicking, fighting the powerful currents with everything he had.

When he could swim no more, he stopped to look back—he’d traveled just *ten feet!* Out of breath, he floated in the surf, summoning more strength and praying that whatever was down there had moved on. His mind searched for answers—*comforting* answers. Perhaps he’d encountered a fish, a piece of trash, a thread of seaweed maybe. The thoughts reassured him. Just not enough to stay in the water.

Holding his breath, he lunged forward. But the thing grabbed his ankle. “*Oh, God!*” he cried, punching and kicking the water. “*Heeeeeeeelp!*” No response. Where the hell was that lifeguard now? “*Pleeeeeeease!*” The invisible beast clutched at his thighs, pulled at his trunks. He felt himself going under. “*HEEEEEEEEEEEELP—*”

Without warning, a massive wave turned the world upside down, separating him from his attacker and sending him somersaulting downward. Burrowing to a stop on the ocean floor, he lay in a heap, dizzy, sore, and out of oxygen. But he wasn’t safe yet—*he needed air!* From the corner of his eye, he spotted the sun, instinctively swimming toward it. An instant before blacking out, he broke the seal of his watery tomb, splashing wildly and wheezing like an asthmatic.

“Nasty tumble, bro.” Woodrow spun, fluid gushing from every orifice. A few feet away, a long-haired teen grinned from atop a Boogie Board.

“Oh, my...*thank God!*” Woodrow coughed, regurgitating saltwater. “Something attacked me...you’ve gotta get out of here...we’ve *all* gotta—”

“Relax, man. Prob’ly just a hungry barracuda or somethin’. Why don’t you head in and alert the Coast Guard.” His expression conveyed total disdain. “Later, bro.”

Woodrow watched him paddle off. Relying on these people for help was futile. He had to save himself. Ducking his head, he kicked

furiously toward shore. Everything ached, but he ignored the pain, swimming as fast as he could, his eyes darting back and forth through the water. There was no sign of his tormentor, no sign of anything out of the ordinary, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong—*terribly* wrong.

A wave pushed him forward, depositing him fifteen yards from shore. Staring at the white sand ahead, he could almost feel the hot, dry granules between his toes. The thing, whatever it was, was probably long gone by now, slithering back to wherever it came from. As he trudged forward, he glanced down, seeing nothing in the water—no slimy serpent, no needle-toothed predator, no sinewy monster from the... *No swimsuit!*

"*Oh, God!*" Where were the neon trunks? He grappled for them, hoping—*praying*—the elusive garment was somewhere nearby. It wasn't. Only the roiling sea stared back, stubbornly concealing the once-maligned suit, a suit he'd now give anything for.

The nightmare wasn't over. It had merely taken a new and sadistic turn.

Woodrow stared with newfound horror at the crowded beach. *He had to find those trunks!* Without thinking, he broke into a frenzied paddle, retracing his path. "Hold on," he heard himself whisper. Could he afford to risk another encounter with his attacker? He glanced back at the bustling beach. Could he afford *not* to?

Indecision paralyzed him. Although he was surrounded by hundreds of swimmers, some no more than ten feet away, Woodrow was completely alone.

"*Dammit, Claire!*" She was responsible for this. She was the one who insisted he get in the water in the first place. Where was his wife now? A cautious smile cracked through his sunburned face. "That's it." Claire was the answer.

With newfound hope, he dog-paddled toward salvation. His plan was simple but relied heavily on Claire's intervention, a shaky prospect at best. His wife had let him down before. He hoped she wouldn't do so again.

At stake was his dignity. Maybe even his *life!*

As he reached shallow water, he called timidly, “Claire.” No answer. Water sloshed to his navel. Children frolicked in the surf a few feet away. “*Claire!*” he shouted, a strolling couple turning to look. He held his breath as they moved on. “CLAIRE!” Still no response. He could see the family umbrella. Why was his wife not answering? “CLAIRE, it’s Woodrow...*CLAAAAAIRE!*”

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OROSO KICKED TO THE surface a hundred yards offshore, spitting out his mouthpiece and staring at tower thirteen—*lucky thirteen* for Woodrow Salmon. The bastard was as good as dead till that hell-born tsunami freed him.

He leaned back and swallowed air, flaccid now, his testicles sore from being led to the brink, then denied. Salmon would pay for that—pay *dearly*. But a second attempt on his life wasn’t possible today. Not with a damaged regulator.

Foiled but never beaten, Oroso removed his mask and climbed into the boat.

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“*JELLYFISH, DUDE!*”

Woodrow wheeled, a portly teenager blocking the sun. “What did—”

“*You better bail, man. It’s gonna nail you!*”

Woodrow looked down, careful not to expose his delicate condition. “What the hell are you—”

“*It’s a jellyfish, mister...RUN!*” Running wasn’t an option. As Woodrow searched the water, he noticed a harmless ‘bag’ floating near his crotch. Relieved, he reached for it, but the translucent blob pulsed forward, revealing a mop of diaphanous projections. Gasping in horror, he shot to his feet and sprinted for land, skidding to a stop three feet from shore. But it was too late. His fears were now a reality. Woodrow stood in ankle-deep water—*naked*—on a crowded southern California beach.

Something struck his hip—a Frisbee. He reached down and

grabbed it, covering himself. But a drooling Labrador shot out of nowhere, sinking its teeth in the toy.

“Give me that goddamn thing!” Woodrow pulled, the determined pet doing the same, forward, back, the impromptu tug of war a warped ballet.

“What do you think you’re...*hey, you’re nude!*” the dog’s owner yelled as he jogged up on the scene. Woodrow turned to face his accuser. He wanted to respond, to somehow dismiss his plight with eloquence and grace, but his tongue wouldn’t move.

He could think of but one thing to do—*RUN!*

Dropping the disk, he darted left, the now-completed sandcastle lying directly in front of him. As he dashed toward it, a thought flashed. Could he take refuge in the structure? Not literally, of course, but by throwing himself on it and rolling around till sand covered his body? The plan was shaky at best, but right now he’d try anything.

As the young architects watched in horror, Woodrow hurled himself at the castle, thrashing about like a fish out of water. Turrets disintegrated. Moist sand flew everywhere. The demolition was total.

As Woodrow rose to his knees, the youngest child began to cry, the oldest running for help. “Wait...” He wiped sand from his eyes. “...it’s okay!” When he could focus, he looked down. To his amazement, the plan had worked. The caked-on residue masked him, not well but enough. Woodrow smiled, looking more like a deteriorating statue than a man.

“*What in the world’s going on here?*” the boys’s mother screamed. Woodrow’s head snapped to the voice, crumbs tumbling to the ground between them. “*Just look what you’ve done!*” She glared at the filthy stranger, eyes red as her fiery locks. “*I oughta have you arrested!*”

Woodrow studied the woman. She was seething—but that was all. “I...uh...I’m sorry.” Holding his breath, he rose to his feet. A few particles fell away, but the disguise held. “Look...if you’ll just let me go—”

“*You’re not going anywhere, bozo! My kids worked all day on that thing!*” As she moved in, Woodrow backed off, inching closer and closer to the waves. “*What gives you the right—*”

Before she could finish, a shore-breaker slammed against his calves, knocking him off-balance. He threw out his hands to break the fall, but it was hopeless. Cleansing water rushed over his body, immersing him in seconds. As he scrambled to his feet, he knew he was in trouble. The woman's stare was no longer one of anger but of shock and repulsion.

Woodrow shoved the kids aside, sprinting away in terror. "*You sick bastard! You touched my kids! YOU TOUCHED MY KIDS!*"

The crowd reacted as he bounded forward. But he ignored their cries, their animated laughter, his only thought—escape.

A whistle split the hysteria. Woodrow flinched but kept moving, the sound growing louder, the anxious cadence of a school fire alarm. Then it ceased. "*Nude man!*" the lifeguard hollered. Woodrow staggered to a halt, peering up at tower thirteen. "*NUDE MAN!*" he belted again.

New levels of panic racked Woodrow's body. He tore off in the opposite direction, arms pumping, legs burning. Behind him, the lifeguard leaped from his perch, pursuing the exhibitionist with smooth, athletic grace, a cheetah on the heels of a wounded wildebeest. "*HE GROPED MY CHILDREN!*" the incensed mother screamed. In the distance, a police van roared to a stop.

"*Oh, God!*" Woodrow changed directions again, spotting the brunette in the string bikini. She was drying her hair with a giant towel. Diving for it, he grabbed a handful of terrycloth, the woman screaming in horror.

As he grappled with the thing, he felt the shadow of the body builder move over him, looking up in time to see him swing. An instant later, Woodrow felt the detonation, a high-frequency hiss filling his ears. He stared at the behemoth, swaying as if on marionette strings, then lowered his gaze.

A flash of brilliant light followed.

Then pure darkness.