

## CHAPTER 1

Amelia Garcia piloted the remotely operated vehicle and thanked God she didn't have to kill someone again. God knew she'd done enough of that. She sent the underwater craft into a sweeping turn, just above the dark ocean floor five thousand feet below her. While the work was fascinating and fully absorbed her chattering mind, it always reminded her of her time piloting the Reaper drone, minus the killing. She'd told herself she had killed for her country to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. To prevent thousands of her fellow citizens from dying like those who died in the World Trade Center towers. Still, along with that thought, a dark, condemning guilt accumulated in her throat, and she battled it back down with a few deep breaths and patriotic affirmations. While some thanked her for her service, they had no idea what her twelve years as an Air Force remotely piloted aircraft pilot had cost her. She was thirty-five and all her friends were married with children, already having completed the ritual of presenting their firstborns to their parents as precious treasures mined from their shared DNA. While she loved children and was happy for her friends, the endless social media posts and relentless conversations about their children shined a spotlight on a gaping hole in her life, eventually leading to uncomfortable and unanswerable questions. Over time, the gap between her top-secret missions and her friends' lovely family lives became a lonely chasm only breached by annual Christmas greetings. She had sacrificed so much for her patriotic duty, yet the nagging feeling that she was placed on this earth to do something special continued to follow her like a storm cloud. She touched the picture of her older sister resting on the console in front of her and prayed to the dark abyss beyond the ROV's lights that her father's account of her sister's death three years ago had been wrong. She ached for their long conversations and her comforting guidance.

She took each assignment as seriously as any mission, but this one fed both her addictive curiosity and her steadfast desire to serve God and country. This was the first deepwater drilling off the coast of Virginia sanctioned by the US government through NOAA, the agency responsible for managing, observing, researching, and protecting the oceans and coasts of the country. The blocks were held by Falzone Energy, the large oil company headquartered in Pittsburgh that had occupied the headlines for the past year. But based on the parade of government and university scientists regularly arriving for clandestine meetings, she suspected their target wasn't oil. The work and its target were confidential, but their presence wasn't. You couldn't hide the enormous drillship, support vessels, and the Navy cruiser providing security from any prying eyes.

Through the narrow window of the control room tucked into the corner of the deepwater drillship, she saw the first red sparks of dawn reaching the clouds on the horizon. As her anticipation of leaving the ship grew, the hum of the diesel generators that had provided the comforting white noise faded, and the protective shell she'd built around herself with her work melted away. She'd kept her anxiety at bay for a month, but now the last shift of her stay was ending. In three hours, she'd board the helicopter and head onshore for her thirty days off, forced to face the barren realities of her life. She refocused on the controls and the screen in front of her. She scanned the seafloor around the massive blowout preventer one last time.

Once her final inspection was complete, she guided the vehicle past a bed of deepwater coral patrolled by a few ghostfish and headed to a small angular bulge in the smooth seafloor that she'd spotted on descent, one hundred yards from the blowout preventer. The image was clear, but fine silt had covered the object like newly fallen snow. The excursion was not sanctioned by the offshore installation manager or NOAA, but as long as her mission was complete, the higher-

ups in her company, including her uncle, ignored her obsession with her miniature deep-sea explorations.

As she approached the anomaly on the sea floor, her pulse quickened. The object was angular, definitely manmade, and had somehow ended up buried in the silt two hundred miles off the coast of the Virginia–North Carolina border. She approached the object until its image occupied the entire screen. The digital readout marked the exact location and depth. Under 4,752 feet of ocean, the frigid water might have preserved the container, but the extreme pressure would have broken most seals and ruined the contents. That is, unless the contents were gems, precious metals, or coins.

She hovered the ROV and snapped a still photo to document the find just in case it was an artifact of interest to the United States regulators in charge of this operation. One 360-degree sweep showed the object was a rectangular box. She guessed it was only a foot and a half long. Her arms tingled with excitement when she realized that the part protruding from the sediment was intact. Guiding the vehicle closer, she gripped the joystick that operated the articulated arm as the thrust from the stabilizers on the ROV stirred the blanket of silt. She reached out with the arm and gently grasped the object. A cloud of sediment enveloped the box as she pulled back on the joystick, extracting the container from the grip of the seafloor. As the cloud of fine particles settled, she carefully stowed the object for the long trip to the surface.

She was one of two pilots on the team that included three technicians and two operators. The trip to the surface filled the balance of her tour, and the daylight crew would be there soon. As the vehicle neared the surface, Gabe Rodgers, the lead operator, entered the control room with his perpetual smile. “Anything I should know about?” he said in his thick Texas drawl.

He was well aware of her hobby of gathering junk from the seafloor for her collection displayed on one side of her two-car garage.

“Good morning, Gabe. And yes. There is one item maybe eighteen inches long.”

“Got it. Split the treasure?”

“Half of nothing is still nothing,” she said, smiling.

“My usual take, then. I’ll put it in your container with your duffel for the trip home.”

Gabe laughed, slapped the door, and headed back out on deck.

The recovery went without a hitch, and she was relieved by the new crew who’d just arrived on the chopper. Back in her quarters, she opened the sealed container and examined the heavy metal box. Its weight surprised her, and it appeared thick-walled and watertight. She grabbed a small wire brush she kept in her duffel and scraped away the sediment covering the lid. Her work first revealed an engraving. It looked like the wing of a bird. She scrubbed harder toward the center of the lid, and the image that appeared sent a tremor through her body. It was an eagle clutching a swastika. She immediately recognized it as a Nazi Eagle, and the sudden sensation swept over her that something evil was watching her. She hurriedly stuffed the box back into the plastic container, placed it in her duffel, and headed for the helipad.

At the shore base in Norfolk, Amelia said her goodbyes to the rest of the crew and loaded her Jeep for the seven-hour trip to Kiawah. Once in the Jeep, she called her uncle.

Uncle Billy had been her favorite since she was a child. While he was the founder and controlling shareholder in Winkler ROV Services, he was also her surrogate dad. She trusted him. Uncle Billy and her Aunt Bessie had always been an oasis from her rocky relationship with her father. Uncle Billy had supported her choices and guided her when she’d asked. He’d also given her the job when she’d left the Air Force two years ago.

They lived on Kiawah Island, a private South Carolina island paradise just south of Charleston. Uncle Billy and Amelia's mother had vacationed there every summer as kids and continued the tradition with their families. Amelia loved vacationing with them, her sister, and her cousin. Ten years ago, Uncle Billy had bought a magnificent home on the island. A year later, Amelia's mother and father followed, building a beachfront home less than two miles from Uncle Billy. Both couples commuted to their Highland Park homes in Dallas as needed for business. Uncle Billy had several vacation rentals on the island and kindly rented one to Amelia at a steep discount when she'd started with Winkler ROV.

Uncle Billy answered on the second ring. "Hey sunshine. Headed our way?"

"Hi Uncle Billy. Yes, I am."

"What's wrong?" He'd always been able to read her moods.

"I may have screwed up."

"Ok. I do that all the time," he said. She could hear the grin in his voice. "What's up?"

"You know how I collect the museum pieces?"

"Officially no. But yes."

"I found something at the end of my tour. It was a small strong box. When I brought it to the surface and started to clean it up, I found Nazi markings on the lid."

The silence confirmed her concerns. If it came from a sunken Nazi warship, it was probably protected by the Sunken Military Craft Act. But she'd seen no such wreck. The closest one was eighty miles away.

"Do you have it with you?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"No. Don't worry. Just describe it for me in detail."

Amelia did and when she was done, he said, “Take it home. Don’t do anything to it. I’ll call a friend I went to school with who’s a lawyer at Justice in DC. He’ll know what to do.”

Having the Department of Justice involved didn’t sound good. “Am I in trouble?”

“No. No. And don’t worry. I won’t use your name. I’ll just see what he comes up with. Just come by in the morning once you’re settled.”

“Okay. Thanks Uncle Billy.”

“Don’t worry. It will be fine. You driving down here today?”

“I’m going to stop and get some sleep. I had the night tour. I’ll drive in late tonight.”

“You just drive safe, and your Aunt Bessie and I will see you in the morning.”

She ended the call and eyed her duffel in the rearview mirror. Uncle Billy had made her feel a little better, but just a little.

## CHAPTER 2

Ike Rossi wanted to stop time and stay in this moment forever. He'd never thought he could feel this way again. The glow of pure joy warmed every cell in his body and a swelling pride filled his chest. He leaned back in the Naugahyde booth in Rossi's, the namesake bar and restaurant he'd rebuilt in Bloomfield, Pittsburgh's little Italy, after a bombing that nearly killed his sister Maria. He watched eleven-year-old Jack Cole, who was seated in another booth across from him. Jack studied the chess pieces on the board. He meticulously moved his queen into position and joyfully declared, "Checkmate!" to his fifty-one-year-old opponent. The awkward genius who had always stared at the floor when confronted, Jack had blossomed since Ike had proved him innocent of the murder charge lodged against him for shooting one of his father's killers in self-defense one year ago, setting him free and giving him his life back. After completing the reconstruction of Rossi's, Ike and Maria had hosted Jack, his aunt Lauren, and his cousin Jimmy every Saturday morning for breakfast before Rossi's opened at eleven.

Jack looked over at Ike, flashed an ear-to-ear smile, and pointed at Randy Shane. “I got him again!”

Ike leaned across the aisle and offered a high five. “That you did.” Jack slapped it. Ike shifted his gaze to Randy and raised one eyebrow. “What do you have to say to that?”

“The same thing you said to that defensive end that cleaned your clock just before you became a legend of western Pennsylvania football, boss.”

Randy had joined Rossi’s as a chef six months ago to follow his true passion after completing a twenty-two-year career as a correctional officer. Ike had met Randy in a grief counseling group last year, and they quickly became friends. Randy’s wife had been killed after a home invasion by an angry escaped con. Even though Ike had lost his parents to an unsolved murder twenty-three years ago, they’d bonded over their losses. Randy had retired and was adrift in his grief, unable to get meaningful work to fill the void. No one would hire a depressed ex-prison guard. But Ike understood and offered him a job. Randy immediately rediscovered his joy of cooking for others and had accelerated Rossi’s comeback with his killer menu and gregarious personality.

Randy turned back to Jack and melted him into the booth with a battle-hardened deadpan stare, but he was a love-and-logic kind of correctional officer, and the stare morphed quickly into a bouncing smile. “Great job, Jacky boy.” He high-fived him across the table.

The click of the door latch at the entrance pulled Ike’s attention to Rossi’s front door as Jenna Price entered, holding her briefcase at her side. Ike’s joy was smothered with the murky darkness of uncertainty when Jenna couldn’t hold his stare. He was back there again, nineteen and in the athletic dorms at Penn State, lost and alone, after the news of his parents’ deaths. Jenna had been Jack’s lawyer on his murder case along with her father who owned the two-



person law firm. Against impossible odds, and with Ike's help, they'd prevailed. Now, she had more business than she and her father could handle. Still, she'd been carving out time helping Ike uncover the truth about his parents' murders, digging into the evidence of a massive corruption and cover-up scandal within the Pittsburgh Police Department that Ike had exposed while freeing Jack.

Ike felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Lauren Bottaro, Jack's aunt and now guardian, with her son Jimmy behind her.

"Hey boys. If it's okay with Lauren, I'll let you test my latest dessert special." Randy stood and was quickly joined by Jack and Jimmy. Upon receiving an approving nod from Lauren, Randy led them to the bar and stopped across from Maria, who'd been getting ready for the eleven-o'clock opening.

"You should witness this," Randy said.

Maria glanced at Ike. He nodded, knowing that ever since her brush with death, she wanted nothing to do with his investigations, especially the one involving their parents' deaths. She only focused on managing Rossi's. Randy's arrival had provided a deeper sense of security. He'd demonstrated that skill on several late-night occasions dealing with overserved patrons more interested in Maria than leaving. Maria smiled at Randy, and they disappeared into the back.

Ike turned and looked up at Lauren. They had grown close over the past year. While they were great friends, Ike sensed they weren't as close as Lauren wanted. They weren't officially dating, but they'd spent time together with and without Jimmy and Jack. Ike trusted her completely. While he still wandered in an emotional desert, he refused to risk touching the third

rail: vulnerability for that deeper connection. He'd tried that once before and lost. He slid over and patted the open seat. Lauren sat just as Jenna arrived at the booth.

"Ike. Lauren." A former basketball standout at the University of Pittsburgh, Jenna folded her thick towering frame into the opposite side of the booth.

"Hi Jenna. How's your dad doing?" Lauren said.

"Great. Running around like he's on fire. He loves that. He knows he's fueling the bottom line and securing Michael's future and then some."

"How *is* your brother?" Ike asked.

"Doing great. He moved to a group setting and still works in the sandwich shop. Dad helped him set up a foundation to help other families deal with all things related to Down Syndrome. They're both having a blast helping others."

"Great to hear. So ..."—Ike looked at Lauren, then Jenna—"what do you have?"

Jenna wagged her head. "Not much new. Brooks Latham still won't cooperate. DA even offered him another sweet deal. Wouldn't budge. He's afraid of someone."

After waiting more than twenty-three years, Ike still didn't have any answers in his parents' murder case. Vic Cassidy, the discredited detective who took over the investigation into his parents' murders nine years ago, had been a key player in a corruption scheme that involved the cops, the largest law firm in Pittsburgh headed by Latham, and the now-imprisoned Joseph Falzone, CEO of Falzone Energy, a multi-billion-dollar oil company based in town. But Cassidy was killed by Ike's mentor, Mac Machowski, just before Mac admitted Ike's mother was involved in something she shouldn't have been, then Mac took his own life. Latham was their only chance to uncover what happened to his parents.

"Does the DA know who he's afraid of?"

“No. Not a clue.”

“Did they find the murder book for my parents’ case?”

“No. And the cops are circling the wagons around the department. The DA’s investigation has slowed to a crawl.” Jenna eyed Ike for a moment, then pulled a manila file from her briefcase and set it on the table. “I did get this from a contact in the department.”

Ike opened the file. It contained two pages. When he saw the title of the first page, he was flooded with possibilities.

*Confidential Informant Agreement*

The tattered form had been heavily redacted with anything identifying either the informant or the controlling agent blacked out. Even the dates on the signature page were concealed. The only information contained in the two pages was that the informant had a spouse and two children.

Ike wasn’t sure he’d like the answer to his next question. He asked it anyway. “Where did this come from?”

“It was allegedly buried in Mac’s desk drawer. It was hidden under a false bottom.”

Ike felt Lauren gently squeeze his shoulder. She nodded when he looked at her, then he refocused on Jenna. “Is it one of my parents?”

“There’s no way to tell.”

Ike leaned back with the paper in his hand. He scanned the framed photographs that filled the area above the bar. He stopped on the one of him and his mother standing in their kitchen, aprons on, both smiling. Cooking was their vehicle to connect. They’d talk about everything while he picked up her favorite recipes and the skill to make them. Two themes his mother had promoted came to mind. The first was the value of service to others and how it was the key to a

happy life. The second was that Ike should always avoid doing anything at all costs that he wouldn't want to see on the front page of the paper. She'd said that little steps in the wrong direction could lead to big trouble.

He shook his head and looked back at the document in his hand. Neither of his parents could have had a connection in the criminal world. It just couldn't have happened. But the form said two children and a spouse. It fit their profile. Mac had said that Ike's mother didn't know what she was getting into. Ike dropped his head, sagged back into the booth, and looked toward the kitchen and Maria.

"Don't show this to her," he said, "It would crush her." He handed the form back to Jenna.

"We don't know it's one of them," Jenna said, slipping the file back into her briefcase.

"We don't know it's not, either," he said. "But if it is, we have a whole new list of possibilities." That thought burned away his disappointment. It was replaced with a renewed hope that he'd find the people responsible. He sat back up.

"Thanks Jenna. I know getting that wasn't easy."

"We don't do easy, do we?" Jenna said with a smile. She stood with the case. "I've gotta get back and help Dad."

"On a Saturday?" Lauren asked.

"Yes." Jenna said, nodding toward Ike. "Thanks to this guy, our caseload is overflowing." She stopped in the aisle and asked, "How's your work at Minuteman?"

"It's a tight hole. The government has it clamped down," Ike said. "I go out there to check security from Falzone's end for Shannon. The feds do the rest."

After Joseph Falzone had gone to prison, his daughter, Shannon, had taken over the firm and fully cooperated with the government. Thanks to the current administration's stance on offshore leasing, they had the rights to the largest oil find in the last twenty years, the first one off the East Coast, but couldn't produce it. The government wanted to assess the seismic anomaly beneath it that was at the heart of Joseph Falzone's cover-up.

"Well, I'm sure it's in good hands. You two take care. Give my best to Maria and the boys."

"We will," Ike said. "Thanks again."

Jenna gave a wave on the way out the door.

"You okay with that?" Lauren asked, still looking at the door.

Ike shook his head. "No. Not really."

"Let me know if I can do anything."

"I w—" Ike's phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and saw it was Shannon Falzone.

"Hi, Shannon. We were just talking about you."

She stayed silent a second too long. "We have a problem. The FBI is on their way here."