

Prologue

I was hanging upside down in my Toyota Tercel, held in place by my seatbelt and shoulder harness, my neck bent against the roof of the car and the steering wheel jammed against my chest. I must have been at the foot of an embankment; I could see headlights passing along I-95 through the jagged glass that was once my windshield. I vaguely remember the tractor-trailer slamming on his brakes, and the Toyota clipping the edge of the truck, my arm instinctively covering my eyes as glass sprayed me.

When the car came to a stop, I'd been flipped over too many times to count. I wiped the blood out of my eyes and tried to focus on where I was. I could see a tangled mass of metal, twisted and jagged pieces still moving, still being pushed toward me. The back of the seat was caving in on me. My purse was hanging in midair, and then it was gone. I heard the constant sound of something dripping, and the unmistakable smell of gasoline.

Terrified the gasoline would ignite and I'd be burned alive, I gasped unevenly, trying to fill my lungs with air, but they were packed with a gurgling fluid and incredible pain shot through me. There was blood everywhere.

My hair was soaked with it, but I couldn't tell whether my head was bleeding, or my face, or which part of my body. It was all covered in blood.

I don't know what terrified me the most—thinking I would die alone, just yards from the interstate but out of sight, or thinking that I would live through this and they would return and torture me before I died. I didn't want Aunt Jo or Margaret or Matt to think I'd died in a traffic accident, when I knew too well it wasn't an accident at all.

I could hear the tractor-trailers moving away in the distance, and then I heard one coming back and stopping near the car. I knew I had to get out; I had to find the strength. I tried pushing against the steering wheel, trying to move it off my chest, but it wouldn't budge. I knew I was suffocating in my own blood.

My ears were filled with the constant drone of the tractor-trailer. Then I heard the truck door open and slam shut, and heard the sound of feet running toward me.

I tried pushing with all my strength against anything I could reach; I tried to stay calm, to figure out how to get out of the seat belt, to get out of this ridiculous upside-down posture, but I couldn't budge. Darkness was creeping in around the edges.

I saw the legs standing beside the car, and then they knelt down beside me. Blue jeans, cowboy boots. And then there was a crack, like thunder.

1

It had all started innocently enough, or so I thought. Looking back, I know now that I was stupid and naïve, but I'd graduated at the top of my class at Vandy and fully expected every computer software firm to knock down my door in an effort to hire me. I'd gained a bit of notoriety when I participated in the Pentagon's test of their new computer system, and hacked my way past their security in less than an hour, and I thought I was hot stuff when *The Nashville Tribune* and Channel 5 News sent out reporters to interview me.

I received all kinds of job offers and could have worked for Microsoft in Seattle or IBM in Miami, but I chose Douglas Murray and Associates in Washington, DC. I chose them for several reasons, really, not the least of which was the fact that they were the largest computer-consulting firm in the country, not to mention that they offered me the most money. And I wanted to see the nation's capital. I thought it would be pretty cool to drive past the White House on my way to work, or visit the monuments on my day off, or maybe do some freelance work for the Pentagon. Boy, was I dreaming.

I'd moved not three weeks ago into a rented townhouse on Empress Street in a section of Alexandria, Virginia known as Old Town. It seemed idyllic, with its narrow,

tree-lined cobblestone street and colonial style homes. I got it at a good price, or so I thought, and I didn't much care that I didn't have a stick of furniture to move into it. Three stories, the first two empty and the third unfinished and filled with some of the owner's furniture, stored there while he was out of the country. Kind of ironic, when you think about it; all of my worldly possessions stuffed into my little compact car, and this guy's got so much stuff he had to leave part of it behind.

But it was my new home, and I was determined to be happy there. I should have known my little slice of paradise was an illusion on my first day at work, when I met Mrs. Smelzer at Douglas Murray and Associates.

She was my new boss, a stout woman maybe fifty-five years old with gray hair and heavy black eyebrows, who had a thick accent that reminded me of concentration camp guards on *The History Channel*. I guess she kind of intimidated me, because I signed every paper she put in front of me without even reading it, something I'd soon regret.

I liked Douglas Murray a lot more; at least he was personable and he said I reminded him of his own daughter. Maybe I wanted to fit that role; my own mother and father had died during my second year at Vandy and I'd felt like an orphan ever since. It was Douglas who gave me my assignments, which consisted of thirty-five hours a week at Metropolitan Trucking Services, which everyone called MTS, and Friday afternoons at the law firm of Robinson, Michaels and James.

It was on a Tuesday in June when I started work at MTS. The company was located in a small, one-story building built of brown brick and smoke colored glass in Lanham, Maryland, just outside of DC. My point of

contact was Pam Parrish. As I waited for Pam in the lobby on that first morning, I remember staring at a picture that hung over the receptionist's desk, a picture of a tractor-trailer that appeared shiny and new, parked at an angle in an open lot.

"Good morning!"

I turned to see a woman who looked to be in her early to mid thirties, approaching me. The first thing that struck me was the light auburn hair; the second thing was an infectious smile.

"I'm Pam Parrish," she said as she approached. "You're Sheila?"

"Sheila Carpenter," I answered. "Nice to meet you."

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Please."

"Good. I need one, too. Come on, I'll show you around." She turned and started toward a door beside the reception desk. "You've already met Cynthia, I guess," she said, nodding toward the receptionist. "Cynthia, Sheila will be working with us on a consultant basis. Please arrange a 'D' pass and an electronic card for her."

She turned to me. "You'll need to have your picture taken for the pass; Cynthia will arrange that for you. You'll need to wear both the pass and the electronic card whenever you're on the premises."

We passed through the door into a wide hallway consisting of a solid wall on the right and cubicles on the left. I could hear a constant hum of voices; phones rang constantly, and there were half a dozen people scurrying from one side of the office to the other.

“The ‘D’ pass means you’ll have access to all of the records in the company except those maintained by the officers, personnel director, and comptroller. The electronic pass will provide access to the front doors after normal business hours, and certain areas inside the building.”

“Is that a standard pass?”

“No.” Pam glanced sideways at me. “An ‘A’ pass is for visitors; they can’t roam the building without an escort. A ‘B’ pass is for the average employee,” she waved her hand toward the cubicles, “which permits access to only those areas they need to perform their jobs. And a ‘C’ pass is for contractors, also permitting access only to specific areas. There’s only one higher than yours; that’s an ‘E’ pass, issued without restrictions.”

I wanted to ask why I’d be provided with a higher pass than the average contractor and employee, but I didn’t want to appear too inquisitive on my first day with a client.

“Ladies room,” Pam announced, as we passed the doors to the rest rooms. “And our lunch room.” She led the way into a medium sized room on the right that was filled with small tables. A full refrigerator, double sink, dishwasher, and microwave were situated against the opposite wall. Against the wall on the left was a large flat-screen television set, turned to the local 24-hour news, its volume turned low. The smell of strong coffee, oranges, and bananas made me wish I’d eaten something for breakfast; lunch seemed a long time away.

Pam walked to the counter, where a set of coffee pots sat warming. “Decaf or regular?”

“Regular.”

I watched as Pam poured two cups of coffee. “There’s creamer and sugar in this cabinet,” she said, opening it. “And the fridge is filled with soft drinks. They’re free; help yourself.”

I picked up one of the cups and sipped the hot, black coffee. “Thanks, I usually take my coffee black.”

“Me, too.” Pam seemed not to have stopped smiling since we’d met. Her eyes were what my great-aunt would call cornflower blue and her head was cocked to one side. Across the bridge of her nose was a scattering of freckles. I took an instant like to her.

“Let’s continue your tour,” she said, leading the way. As we left the lunchroom, Pam turned to our right and stopped. “All of these cubicles belong to our customer service reps. We have contracts with over 300 customers. They call us when they need something hauled, and this section handles the orders.”

“What do you transport?” I asked.

“We personally don’t transport anything. MTS is a broker. We have contracts with over a hundred trucking companies who haul anything from chickens to cars. Look around you. There isn’t a thing in this room that wasn’t brought here by truck. The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the gas in your car – *everything* is hauled by truck.”

“What about the railroads? Are they a competitor?”

“They compete for long hauls—that’s when items are shipped across country. But even if they arrive in a town by rail, they’re still shipped to the delivery point by truck.” She started to walk toward the back of the office. “The industry moves about seven billion tons of items per year. We have a tiny fraction of that.”

The right wall ended, opening into another area filled with cubicles. “These are our dispatchers. They’re responsible for locating truckers to haul the loads. The feds tell us the industry is short about 80,000 drivers, and we often feel it. It gets tricky, trying to fill an order. Especially when we need a reefer or something out of the ordinary.”

“A reefer?”

“A refrigerated trailer.” She laughed good-naturedly. “Don’t worry; you’ll get used to all the terms around here.”

It was mind-boggling, watching dozens of people hurrying around the office and the telephones ringing off the hook. I glanced behind her at a bank of reps. “So every call that comes in over there—” I pointed to the customer service area “—results in work for the dispatcher over here?”

“You got it. The customer service rep enters the order in the computer, and it immediately shows up on the dispatcher’s screen. You know when you go to a fast food restaurant and the order taker punches the keys on the cash register and your order appears on a screen in the back, where it’s filled?”

I nodded.

“It’s like that here, only we’re moving more than food.” Pam continued walking, turning the corner around the wall, and stopped at a closed door on the right. She reached for an electronic card on a chain around her neck, and swiped it through a card reader mounted beside the door. A steady red light on the card reader turned green.

“This is our mainframe,” she said as she opened the door. She took a couple of steps in and motioned for me to enter.

The room was much cooler than the rest of the office, and I found myself rubbing my arms to stay warm.

“I have to warn you, I know absolutely nothing about computers,” Pam was saying. “The software has been in place for about twenty years; thank God we haven’t had any problems, because the original programmer is long gone. We have a contract that covers any hardware malfunctions, which occurs every now and then. Our goal is to get rid of this system within the year, and replace it with PCs.” She turned to me. “That’s where you come in.”

I stepped over to the equipment and read the name on the case. “Amdahl.” I felt a lump growing in my throat. “I have no experience with this.”

“I didn’t think you would. You’re too young. Nothing personal,” she added, “but I think this stuff is older than you.”

Pam walked to the far side of the room. “We’ve ordered a new file server; when it arrives, it’ll be placed here,” she said, pointing to an empty table. “When we switch to the new system, all of the other equipment will be removed. Obviously, your electronic card will permit access to this room; only those with ‘D’ and ‘E’ passes are allowed in here.

“Your expertise is really needed here,” she continued. “Initially, the new system will be available only to those in this office. I think that’s called a local?”

“A ‘LAN’, or Local Area Network.” I said. “It’s when only those PCs in a small geographic area, such as a building or a campus, have electronic access to the file server.”

Pam’s smile widened. “You sound like a teacher.”

“I was a teaching assistant in the Information Technology Department in college.”

“Good. I need somebody I can understand.”

She left the room, motioning for me to follow. We turned another corner, into an area that was much quieter than the cubicles. Pam waved her hand toward a set of office doors. “These are admin offices,” she said, “payroll, HR, comptroller – that’s me. Down that hall is the delivery entrance. You smoke?”

I shook my head no.

“Then you’ll probably never use that door. We have a no-smoking policy inside the building. Everybody who smokes hangs around the outside of that door. One whiff of that air and you’ll probably get lung cancer on the spot.”

She reached an office and gestured for me to enter.

“This’ll be your office, next door to mine. Since I have all the details on our accounting practices, we’ll be working closely together. The plan is for us to pair up. We’ll use my knowledge of trucking and accounting, and your knowledge of computers, to design our new accounting system.”

“Okay.” I was in awe as I walked to my new desk. A real office, not a cubicle. The desktop was clear except for a few accessories: a stapler, tape dispenser, note pads, and pencil holder.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d need, so I put a few things out for you,” Pam said. “I’ll show you where the supply room is, so you can get whatever you want.”

“These should be fine for now,” I answered, moving around the desk. Sitting in the corner of the L-shaped desk was a state-of-the-art computer with two CD drives and a twenty-one inch monitor. I felt like a kid in a candy store.

“I’m told that both of the drives are RWs,” Pam said. “I guess that’s good?”

“Oh, yes.” I looked up at Pam; she appeared a little uncertain. “That’ll allow me to copy the programs I do for you onto a CD.” Pam’s eyebrows furrowed, and I quickly added, “For backup purposes, or to install the program somewhere else in the office.”

“Have a seat,” Pam said, sitting in one of the chairs across from my new desk.

I sat down. This felt so good and yet so strange, to be sitting on this side of the desk, like I was somebody important.

“You signed a confidentiality agreement?” Although it was a statement, Pam said it as though she wanted confirmation.

“Yes.”

“I need you to get a copy of it faxed to me here today. It’s critical you understand you’re going to be privy to a great deal of extremely sensitive information. You’re going to know people’s salaries, how much we charge for hauling loads, and how much we pay our truckers. Information doesn’t get any more confidential than that in this business.”

“I understand.”

“I’m trusting that you do. You’re not to discuss anything we do with anyone—not anybody who works here at MTS, regardless of their position—and not with anyone at Douglas Murray’s office. If anybody approaches you and asks for information, refer them to me, and then let me know immediately who approached you. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Completely?”

“Completely.”

“Any questions?”

“No. In fact, I was expecting confidentiality.”

“Good.” She glanced at her watch. “I have a meeting, so I’ll leave you alone to get settled. I’ll be back shortly, and we can begin work.” She rose and started toward the door.

“Great,” I said.

“If you need anything, let me know.” She stopped in the doorway. “Oh, and the supply room is down this hall to your right. Help yourself to whatever you need. If you continue past there, you’ll be back at the reception desk. The office is arranged in a kind of semi-circle.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I spent the next few minutes going through my desk drawers (other than a couple of pads of paper, they were empty), and looking out the window in my new office. I called Mrs. Smelzer and asked her to fax a copy of the Confidentiality Agreement I’d signed to Pam; she was surprisingly responsive and promised it within the half hour.

Then I walked down the hall to the supply room. It was pretty quiet on this side of the building. I saw Pam in her office, going over some paperwork with a cute guy. She glanced up as I passed her door, and I kind of half-waved. Pam returned to her conversation.

In the other offices, employees appeared focused on their computer screens or engrossed in telephone conversations.

The supply room door was open. The room was about fifteen feet square and filled with shelves from top to bottom. Every shelf was loaded with pencils, pens, envelopes, letterhead, paper, and office supplies of every description. I walked around the room, feeling like I'd just hit a jackpot, trying to decide what I'd need and wanting it all.

As I approached the back wall, I noticed something dark in the far corner, something black and metal above white boxes with bold red print. I took a step back and stood on the tips of my toes. It was a camera.

I picked out a few office items, nothing fancy, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched, and I wondered who was on the other end of this thing. Once I had an armful, I returned to my office, where I took some time arranging everything properly.

Curiosity got the better of me, so I walked down the hall in the opposite direction, toward the lunchroom. This time, I looked above the cubicles, searching without trying to appear too obvious. There were cameras at each corner of the room—cameras whose eyes were directed at the rest room doors, the lunchroom, the hallways, the computer room door, and undoubtedly watching the activity in the cubicles.

They weren't hidden; in fact, they were quite obvious. Yet no one appeared to pay any attention to them. This side seemed much busier; at least, it was much louder. The phones rang constantly, sometimes three or four at the same time. I passed several people on my way to the lunchroom; they all smiled and nodded or greeted me briefly, as they rushed to perform their various duties.

The lunchroom was empty, as it had been when Pam had shown it to me earlier. I immediately located another camera, mounted just above the refrigerator.

Trying to appear natural, I crossed the room to the refrigerator. Inside were perhaps three dozen cans of various soft drinks, along with what appeared to be lunches brought from home. I pulled out a Sprite, and then headed back to my desk.

Having sated my curiosity about the cameras, I turned my full attention to my new computer. I turned it on with the excitement of a kid on Christmas morning, and was amazed at how fast the Windows logo and desktop was displayed. I thought my system at home was fast, but this one would leave mine in the dust. It had a monstrous hard drive, more RAM than I could ever envision using (though I'd try), and even a fax/modem. What horsepower! But the screen was the most impressive; a flat screen monitor that was larger than my first television set, but was less than three inches thick.

"How's it going?"

I jumped, and then laughed nervously. I hadn't realized how engrossed I'd become.

"Sorry; I didn't mean to scare you," Pam said.

"Oh, that's okay. I just got carried away, looking at this PC."

“Is it sufficient?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Pam glanced at her watch. “I didn’t mean to take this long. Want to grab some lunch?”

“Sure,” I said, rising. “What time is it?”

“Almost twelve. I’ll drive; I know a nice little sandwich shop near here.”

The Round Table was actually located in a round building and was obviously a popular place, judging from the trouble we had finding an empty parking space. Pam drove what appeared to be a late model Toyota Land Cruiser, whose size prevented us from parking in some of the smaller spots.

We were seated pretty quickly on the second floor. I could faintly hear Celine Dion in the background; the hum of voices drowned out most of the music.

“The food is wonderful here,” Pam said.

Maybe it was the odor of sizzling fajitas or the sight of a huge Cobb salad that made me suddenly ravenous. “What are you having?”

“I’m watching my weight, so I’m just having a turkey sandwich. But anything you choose will be good.”

I longed to order a full course meal, but I settled on a hot roast beef sandwich.

“So,” Pam said between bites, “Douglas tells me that you’ve moved here from Tennessee.”

“Yeah,” I answered. “I’ve only been here a few days.”

“Had you ever been here before?”

“Never. To be honest, it’s kind of overwhelming.”

“Why?”

“Oh, the traffic, not knowing where I’m going, mostly.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll get easier. Once you learn your way around, you’ll love it. Most people who stay here think it’s the center of the universe.”

We chatted about DC and the differences between Maryland and Virginia (Marylanders swore their state was the best of the two, and Virginians claimed the opposite), and the political climate in the area. Pam was refreshingly knowledgeable.

“You’ll get used to it here,” she said as we finished and prepared to leave. “There’s really so much to do.”

“You sound like you really know the area,” I said. “Are you from here?”

“No; but I’ve been here for almost two years. I’m originally from New Hampshire; in fact, this is the farthest south I’ve ever been.” She rose. “Ready to get back to work?”