Prologue

March 2015

He checked the contents of his pockets one more time, just to be sure. Attention to detail was an inherent trait—not something practiced for this particular activity. Something imbued in the very fiber of his being. A few people who knew him had called him obsessive, a term he thought was both an overstatement and somewhat derisive. He preferred *thorough* or *fastidious*, and prided himself on being so, especially tonight.

Counting the magnetic key card that opened his room, there were two crucial objects he needed to carry out the plan. He had learned not to rely on the phone app to open his hotel room door consistently enough to be relied upon, and he certainly didn't want to stand out in the memory of the person at the front desk by having to ask for a duplicate key card at this time of night. He was hoping, in fact, that he could slip out and then back in unnoticed by the front desk clerk, and he was counting on the fact that the young man or woman who was working the midnight shift was probably so bored and tired that they were not paying much attention to anything going on in the atrium of the Hilton Garden Inn in downtown Oklahoma City.

Probably won't even be awake, he thought ... hoped.

He had given some thought to searching for a back entrance where he might have a better chance of going unseen, but he decided that he would have an easier time explaining his activity as an uneasy sleeper out for some fresh air if he came and went through the main entrance than if he was caught "sneaking" in through a back entrance. Overall, his plan was very simple and governed by several rules that he would discipline himself to follow. One of the rules—perhaps the most important one—was to appear as nonchalant as possible, just in case he was seen by anybody who might later recount their observations to the authorities. At present, he was having trouble adhering to this rule. He was nervous. It would be his first time, after all.

What the fuck is wrong with you? Relax. You've thought this through a million times.

After verifying his possessions, he took one last look in the mirror. His overall appearance would lend itself to the insomniac routine: unkempt hair covered by a baseball cap haphazardly placed on his head, a rumpled white undershirt, sweatpants, and a black leather jacket to combat the early March air. The only thing he disliked in his reflection was the look on his face. The growing apprehension he felt was not so subtly displayed in his eyes. He looked too alert because he was. He tried to produce a yawn and relax his facial muscles in an effort to look a little more sleep-deprived. He even tried to partially close his eyelids to enhance the overall effect.

Better. Not that important anyway. Just keep your head and eyes down in case the front desk clerk is an overachiever.

As he left the room, he patted his pants pocket one more time to feel the magnetic key card before he let the door click behind him. *Details, details.* Maybe he was a bit obsessive, but it would serve him well tonight. The other object needed no confirmation, as its weight within his jacket's interior pocket confirmed its presence.

He proceeded down the hallway along the darkly patterned, low pile carpet common in so many hotels, until reaching the bank of two elevators. With no other demands this time of night, the lighting of the red down arrow and simultaneous *bing* heralded the arrival of one in short order.

He punched the first-floor button and began the short ride down, all the while concentrating on relaxing his face and eyes as he studied the placard welcoming him to the hotel and reminding him of all its accoutrements. With a short *bong* the elevator door slid open, and he made a left turn toward the main lobby. As he proceeded to the main entrance, the front desk was off to his left. Like nearly every Hilton Garden Inn, the elevators had been placed behind the front desk, so his approach toward the main entrance allowed him to see the front desk clerk from behind before his presence became known. He could see she appeared to actually be doing work at her console, not just mindlessly staring at her phone as he had hoped.

Unbelievable. I get the one busy body working the graveyard shift.

Though his sudden appearance caused her to be slightly startled, she gave him a nice smile but didn't say anything. He gave his best sleepy half-smile in return and slumped his shoulders a little more to emphasize the part he was playing tonight. "Can't sleep. Gonna get some fresh air," he blurted, somewhat impromptu. *Fuck! Engagement wasn't part of the plan.* Without leering, he tried to take in a few details about her as he passed. She was Black, probably mid-twenties, with a pleasant face and kind eyes. *Unsuspecting eyes*. He liked that. She was still too young and naïve to assume the worst in people, so she probably bought into his sleepless routine without even giving it a second thought. He found no need at this point to abort the plan, even though he wished she hadn't seen him at all.

After exiting the building, he made a left turn up to the corner of East Sheridan and Mickey Mantle Drive and stopped. He stood there for a moment trying to decide which way to go. This was another one of the rules he had set for his plan to succeed. For it to be a truly random act, he had forced himself not to draw out the route he would take ahead of time. This was also a difficult rule for him because he was so used to planning ahead. He always wanted to *know* these types of details ahead of time.

Suddenly, the voice of his ex-wife interrupted his inner monologue: "You never do anything spontaneous!" That was one of her many criticisms and had been delivered ad nauseum whenever she would try to surprise him with a trip to some exotic locale. His reason for refusing to go was always that he had no idea what would be in store for them when they arrived, since neither of them had done

the requisite research on lodging, attractions, currency exchange, and other items he deemed critical to such an adventure. He never could understand how people like his ex could go through life with absolutely no plan.

He did not have the luxury of distraction so he shoved that unpleasantness out of his mind and returned to the task at hand. If he went left, he knew it would take him back into the heart of the Bricktown area where he had dined earlier in the evening. After a club sandwich and a beer, he had returned to the hotel to focus on the night's planned event. He wasn't checking out until 11:00am, so he would still have plenty of time to get back for a full night's sleep.

He suddenly remembered a canal running through Bricktown, in between some shops, restaurants, and a miniature golf course. *Perhaps*, he thought. *Canals have bridges, and bridges could prove fruitful.*

He made a left on Mickey Mantle and quickly crossed the street, proceeding southbound until he found an access point to go below the street level and down to the canal. It was the middle of the week, so the restaurants and bars had very few patrons. That was good, but he would still be sure to alter his route going back to the hotel so as not to be seen twice by anyone in the area. There was ample light from the street level to allow him to see without running into anything—or anyone—but not enough to illuminate his features as he made his way further southbound.

The canal and the adjacent sidewalk he was using both made a turn toward the east after a block or so. He continued following the sidewalk for at least five minutes and had already passed under several bridges. As he approached the next bridge, he thought he could see what he'd been looking for. A man lay propped up against one side of the angular concrete wall under the north side of the bridge. As he approached the poor soul and took note of his meager belongings lying next to him on the ground, his pulse began to quicken. He had thought about this moment for most of his adult life, and now it was here.

He surveyed his surroundings quickly. To his left and up the hill was a small green space, and beyond that a large parking lot. To his right and back along the canal less than a hundred yards was the back side of a typical bar and grill with a large outdoor patio that was unoccupied at the moment. Because he was away from the main thoroughfares, the yellowish glow of streetlamps was less here, which was perfect.

As he reached inside his jacket for the .40 caliber pistol in the inner pocket, he made one last survey of the circumstances surrounding what he was about to do. It still wasn't too late to abort … but he had come this far. The location was almost ideal, mostly hidden and mostly dark. He wished it was a little farther away from the hotel, but ultimately that shouldn't matter. The man under the bridge fit his profile perfectly: Someone that had been abandoned by society. Someone with nobody to miss him. A taker, a drain on resources. *Just like my ex.*

A case that the cops would quickly set aside for more pressing matters.

By now he was standing over the man with his gun drawn and pointing at the grizzled face of someone that had undoubtedly seen the worst that life has to offer. *I'll be doing him a favor, releasing him from this prison that has become his life.*

Still, despite trying to convince himself that he could do it, one prominent doubt lingered in his brain. He wasn't worried about the physical act itself, that was just a matter of pulling the trigger, and at this range, he couldn't miss. He wasn't worried about being caught either. He had worked this plan out in his head for several years and considered himself to be of such a higher intellect than the average police detective who would likely be assigned to this case that he was virtually guaranteed to walk away unsuspected.

He also wanted to do it. He was so sick and tired of these types of people. These good-for-nothings. These people who took and took and took, and offered nothing productive in return.

The only mental obstacle standing in the way of him pulling the trigger now that the ideal candidate had presented itself was a nagging worry about the effects it would have on his own psyche.

For most of his adult life, he had wondered what it would be like to kill another human being. He didn't think that this made him exceptional in any way, and certainly not crazy. In fact, he believed that a lot of people had pondered the same question at one time or another.

It's just that none of them had the guts to find out what it feels like to kill someone. That's why he was here, to find out. And to do society a favor. But even though he had always wanted to know, and even though he was staring opportunity in its worn, grizzled face, something in his mind kept telling him, *you'll regret having found out for the rest of your life.*

Out of nowhere, an old song lyric materialized in his head. A song he hadn't heard or thought about in years. And yet, there it was, and how apropos.

It was a sly, jazzy thing that treated killing as a craft anyone could learn. The opening verse was the one that came to him now. Make the decision first. Turn your heart cold. Then find out whether your hands will go along.

His hand shook. Sweat beads formed under his ball cap, despite the chill in the air. It was now or never. Suddenly, the man on the ground must have sensed his presence and opened his eyes. The initial look of confusion on the man's weathered face quickly turned to recognition and then … something else. *Acceptance, maybe? Relief?*

Without really being conscious of the fact that he had decided to finish the plan, he felt the recoil of the gun in his hand and heard the small spit of the muffled gunshot shatter the still night air. It was done.

* * *

What did they call it?

What did who call what?

The shrinks. What I have.

Post-traumatic stress disorder. What's wrong with you? You can't remember anything anymore.

But I do remember. I remember too much. Just not the things I want to remember.

Serves you right. For what you did.

It was war. Chaos. How was I supposed to know they would be there?

Still. They died by your hand. You pulled the trigger.

I wanna talk to Mom. I'm gonna call her.

With what? You don't have a phone, remember? You don't have shit anymore. You lost it all.

But I just talked to her the other day. She wished me happy birthday. She said she wanted me to come home.

That was three months ago.

But if I call her now, maybe I can go see her and Dad.

You don't have a phone! What's wrong with you?

Jeez! What was that?! Take cover!

It was just a loud motorcycle driving by overhead. The exhaust noise was coming down through the grates, echoing off the walls.

It reminded me of ...

I need to call Mom. I need to see her.

We've been over this. You have no phone. No money. No way to call her, or to go see her. And worse, she has no way to find you anymore. You're completely cut off. She doesn't even know where you live because you don't live anywhere. Not anymore.

But the last time I talked to her, she seemed worried. Maybe she needs my help. I need to see her. I need. I need her help. I can't do this. Mom and Dad, they always know how to fix things. Maybe they can fix this. I just have to find a way to get th—

How?! No phone! No money! No nothing!

Maybe the ... what's that place called?

What place?

The place! The place where they give me the pills.

The VA?

Yeah, the VA. Maybe they can help. That's what they do, right?

Yeah, there's a great plan. Go ask the VA for a plane ticket to Madison. See how that goes. Even if they would do it—which they won't—it would take months.

But at least it's a plan. It can't hurt to ask.

Sure, sure. You go ask. All they can do is say no.

Right. So that's a plan. I'll start heading there right now.

It's practically the middle of the night. I doubt you'll find the doors unlocked. Why don't you get some sleep. Head over in the morning.
Yes. Sleep. I am pretty tired. And I'm already at my favorite sleeping spot. I just hope I don't dream. My dreams aren't good. I see them. Their faces. Their little bodies on the ground. They weren't supposed to be there! What were they doing there? It wasn't my fault!
But it was.

What is that? Who is that?
Who is what?
That presence. I feel it.
Open your eyes.
What the hell? Who is this guy? Where am I? Is that a gun?
Looks like this is how it ends.
Serves me right …

1

October 2025

Beneath a sky unblemished by even the vaguest hint of a cloud sat thirty-year-old Benjamin Wolfe. The heat and humidity of summer had graciously moved on and the horizon was awash in a breathtaking palette of autumn foliage, juxtaposed against the azure sky that had completely rid itself of summer's haze and cumulonimbus clouds. This late in the month, the leaves on the trees had peaked in color and would soon be falling off in nature's ever-present effort to renew itself. Despite the bright sunlight, the late afternoon air had a cool crispness to it that made him appreciate his decision to wear a light fleece. *What a perfect day*, he thought.

The peace he enjoyed was suddenly interrupted by the sound of little feet running toward the scale-modeled air traffic control tower behind him, accompanied by a child's laughter. After a moment or two, a young family appeared as well. Ben studied them briefly, a habit he had developed in concurrence with his job. The mother and father both appeared to be around his age, a reminder that most of his friends had already married and some had also started families—both things currently lacking in his life.

The father wore a light blue sweatshirt, with "UNC Tar Heels" emblazoned on the front, reminding Ben that the *Heels*, as they were known to fans, had a big game today against Clemson. When he first moved to Charlotte from New Jersey, his indoctrination into Southern culture and specifically, North Carolina culture, had begun immediately. A key part of that was knowing why it was known as the "Tar Heel State". He had been amused at the fact that locals couldn't entirely agree on the origin of the moniker. One theory held that British soldiers defending King George's colonies against those hotheaded colonists had named North Carolina militiamen the "Tar Heels" because they never turned and ran from a skirmish, almost as if they had tar on their heels and were therefore stuck in one place. Another theory referenced the abundance of pine trees in the state, and the associated pine tar that one might encounter on the heels of their boots while passing through.

The mother wore a baseball cap with her ponytail sticking out of the hole in the back, along with a non-descript red sweatshirt and jeans. She was pushing a stroller with the youngest member of the clan in it fast asleep. The child that had broken the silence was now attempting to climb up the outside of the miniature replica of an air traffic control tower against his father's admonitions to the contrary.

The energy with which the young boy scrambled around caused Ben to wonder, not for the first time, why he no longer possessed the energy of his youth. It seemed to him lately that his desire to sleep was on the rise, while his desire to exercise or do other physical activity was on the decline.

Is this what depression feels like?

He was used to interruptions at his favorite study location. In fact, he had been pleasantly surprised when he first arrived and found it deserted. That didn't last long, of course. It never ceased to amaze him that regardless of the time of day or day of the week, there were always people here watching the airplanes take off and land.

The Charlotte Airport Authority had done a nice job choosing the location for this observation area, as it offered an unobstructed view of runway 19L/1R. In addition, where other big airports simply found a hill overlooking the airport from outside the fence line and called it an observation area, the CLT managers had chosen to invite onlookers onto the airport grounds, just on the north end of the property. They had done an equally nice job constructing a space that protected observers from sun and rain, offered numerous educational displays, and had a memorial site for the victims of an airline crash that had occurred while approaching the airport in violent thunderstorms in July of 1994.

It also offered him something else he needed when studying grew tedious: inspiration. In contrast to his enjoyment of the afternoon, he was struggling through an impossibly thick book with an orange cover, filled with nearly a thousand possible questions he might be asked on his 60-question FAA Private Pilot written examination. The answers were provided to each question, along with a brief and often vague explanation as to why that particular choice was more correct than the others. Ben couldn't help but think that it was a bit dubious for the FAA to allow all its questions and answers to be published prior to the test. It was like cheating, and yet it didn't help him understand the material any better at all. He had the innate sense that memorizing the answers to a test was a measure of his memory, not his knowledge—a subtle but important difference.

He found himself reading the same question again for the third time. It had to do with the effects of something called "density altitude" on aircraft performance. He often reread the same question when the material made no sense, which tended to make his mind drift to other things and thus lack the focus needed to understand the material.

By now, several more people had come to enjoy the last vestiges of this perfect afternoon before the sun relented to the inevitable onset of night. Ben had been joined on his favorite bench by another man who seemed to be watching him as much as anything else. When Ben looked up from his book and made eye contact, the man nodded and spoke. "I noticed you're studying the Gleim," referencing the term applied to the big orange book after the author, Irvin Gleim. "I never did know if it was pronounced *glime* or *gleem*, but I've always called it *glime*," he continued with a small chuckle.

Ben wasn't generally predisposed to engage total strangers in conversation. However, recognizing that the man was obviously familiar with his study material, he asked, "You a pilot?"

"Well, I've been called worse," the man responded in an affable tone. With an easy grin and an extended hand, he introduced himself. "I'm Bill."

They shook hands. Since Bill didn't offer his last name, neither did Ben. "I'm Ben. Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure's all mine, Ben." A short pause, then, "So … you come here to study?" The quizzical look on his face suggested that he thought the number of distractions here might be counterproductive to any effective learning.

Ben tried to offer an explanation for his motivation: "*Trying* to study. I also just like being here, I guess."

His new acquaintance just looked at him for a moment without responding. There seemed to be recognition in his eyes, like he knew what Ben meant without having to verbalize it. Then he nodded slowly and pursed his lips slightly as if to say, "I understand." And for some reason, Ben knew he did.

"I hope you don't think I'm nosy or anything," he continued, "but I noticed you've been on the same page ever since I sat down."

Ben looked back down at the page he was on. He took a deep breath and let it out. He shook his head and replied, "Yeah, this stuff isn't really making much sense to me."

Bill apparently sensed the dejection in Ben's voice. He spoke this time at a lower volume as he leaned in as if to impart a secret to Ben. "Well, if it was easy, everybody would be a pilot. Most people can't even drive a car well." A mildly self-satisfied grin established itself on his face and Ben felt somehow more at ease.

He responded with a smile of his own, one that had rarely appeared on his face in recent months. Bill was a congenial fellow and had quickly broken through the barrier Ben put up to ward off most people.

"So, what is it you're having trouble with anyway? Maybe I can help," Bill continued. His speech was drawn out more, and even though he only showed a slight trace of a Southern dialect, Ben knew he must be a native of the area, which was increasingly rare in this day and age of the constantly migrating middle class.

"Well … I must've read this question about density altitude at least fifty times now. I never knew there were so many different types of altitude: density, pressure, true … what's the other one?"

"Absolute."

"Right." Ben shrugged his shoulders. "I really can't distinguish between them all."

Bill appeared to think about his response for a second. "When did you start your flying lessons?"

"Actually, I've only been up once, on an introductory flight. That was a couple of months ago."

Bill's eyebrows furrowed ever so slightly at this. "Why haven't you flown since then?"

"After my introductory flight, the instructor that was assigned to me told me it would be best if I study this book until I was ready to take the written exam and get that out of the way before I continue with any flying lessons. He said that way I would have a better understanding of what we're going to do in the airplane by the time we go up and do it." As Ben gave this explanation, his new companion pressed his lips together in a more contemplative way and nodded his head slightly as if considering what Ben was saying. Ben could see the look of increasing concern on Bill's face, however. Since he didn't want to appear completely ignorant, and in an effort to defend his flight instructor's advice, he feebly added, "It made sense to me at the time." *Why am I defending myself? I just met this guy.*

Bill nodded in contemplation of his next words. "This instructor of yours. Young guy?"

"Younger than me, I think."

"Mm-hm. I know the type. Using the instructing gig to build hours on his way to something bigger. Probably has *zero* interest in teaching the academic side of learning to fly, so he sent you to study on your own."

Ben was somewhat taken aback by the bluntness of Bill's words. "Uh … I don't know. I never asked him what his plans are. When I walked in with the gift certificate and asked about an introductory flight, he just happened to be hanging around the office at that moment." Ben was starting to feel a little uneasy with Bill's open criticism of his instructor. After all, Ben had taken his advice without questioning it at all, so Bill was indirectly criticizing Ben's judgment as well. *That's why I'm getting defensive. But what the hell?*

"Somebody gave you a gift certificate for a flight?"

"Yeah, it was kind of weird, actually. It came in the mail one day from the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. The letter attached said that it was being sent to me because I had expressed an interest in learning to fly. That was the weird part. I had never told anybody about my desire to fly, even though it had always been in the back of my mind, I guess. I went to an air show about a year ago at Seymour Johnson and I remember filling out a card to win some door prize. They must have gotten my name and address from there. I figured it was just a marketing ploy—they didn't actually know I wanted to learn how to fly. Anyway," Ben shrugged again, "I didn't think much about it because I was too excited to take that first lesson."

"Are you still excited?" Bill asked.

Ben actually had to think about it. "Yeah … I guess so. I didn't know it would be this much work."

Bill nodded again in recognition of Ben's confession, as if he had heard it all before. "You mind a little advice from an old geezer like me?"

Unsolicited advice. My favorite kind. "Not at all," replied Ben, masking his growing apprehension about the direction this conversation was going.

"I think you should be flying at the same time you're studying for the written exam. It's called correlation, a concept that most new instructors simply aren't accustomed to. See, if you were actually taking flying lessons while you were studying, then you could see and feel the effects of density altitude on your airplane on different days under different atmospheric conditions. Then you could *correlate* that knowledge to your written exam, and you wouldn't just be memorizing answers. For example, if you did your first flight back in the heat of summer, you'd think the plane you were flying could barely pull itself off the ground. But, if you went flying in that same plane today when it's much cooler out, you'd be amazed at the difference in performance. That's the effect of density altitude."

Ben was impressed. And also frustrated. Here he had been struggling through this damned book for two months now, with nobody to help explain anything to him, when he should have been flying an airplane the whole time and learning as he went. It made perfect sense. Ben knew that he had always learned better by doing and observing, rather than just reading.

"How do *you* know all this?"

Bill looked at him again. It was as if he had been building up to this moment since they met. The perfect sales pitch, gain their trust then finish the job. "I'm a flight instructor, too. Only I've been doing it now for thirty years."

Ben had the vague sense that his mouth was slightly open and he was staring at Bill. On one hand, this guy seemed to know what he was talking about. On the other hand, Ben felt like he had just been approached under a false pretense. He remembered last year when he had been dining at an outdoor restaurant by himself. He was eating and leafing through one of those free magazines that listed houses for sale. An attractive woman came over to his table and made small talk for a few minutes. Ben could have sworn she was flirting with him. Then she mentioned that she noticed he was house hunting and she just happened to be a realtor. *False pretense*. He had taken her card with a smile and then proceeded to throw it away with the rest of his trash after he finished his meal. It was instances like these that made Ben wary of placing his trust in people he met, and why he felt totally justified in doing so, even though there was a small part of him that wished he didn't hold that apprehension.

Ben pursed his lips and turned back to his book. There it was again. That same question he had read over and over now for almost half an hour. Bill seemed to sense the sudden apprehension on Ben's face. He tried to act less interested without dropping it altogether. "Where did you say you're taking lessons?"

"I didn't. Wright Flyers up in Concord," Ben replied tersely. He hoped his disdain for Bill's approach wasn't obvious, but he knew his clipped answer and sudden lack of eye contact was a dead giveaway. He had been working harder lately to not wear his emotions on his sleeve. It was a work in progress.

"Well, I'll get out of your hair and let you get back to studying. Here's my card if things don't work out with the good folks over there at Wright Flyers." Bill handed him a very non-descript business card that simply said:

BILL
CERTIFIED FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

Ben realized for the first time that Bill had never volunteered his last name, nor was it on his card. *At least he put his phone number on the back*, he thought.

Despite his misgivings about Bill's approach, Ben found himself wishing he wouldn't go. Even though he felt a bit duped, he also recognized that Bill could turn out to be an invaluable resource if he intended to pursue this dream of learning to fly. At the same time, though, he couldn't escape the obligation he felt toward his flight instructor and the young married couple that owned Wright Flyers. He hadn't signed a contract or put any money down, but he had given them an implied verbal commitment to do his flight training with them. He hated changing his mind, and even more he hated going back on his word.

As Bill started to rise, Ben asked, "Did you ever want to move on to something bigger when you started out?"

Bill paused briefly before responding. "I suppose so, but teaching and mentoring aspiring pilots like yourself … it's in my blood, I guess." He nodded his head once more then turned and walked away.

Ben watched him go, then turned back to the big, orange book. He slammed it closed in frustration and turned his attention to the remainder of the afternoon splendor.

2

The clock radio beside his bed jolted Ben awake. He had been deeply asleep when the music started and was so startled by the sudden intrusion of noise that he bolted upright in bed and looked around for a few seconds before his brain caught up to what was happening. The radio was tuned to a local classic rock station and Ben was treated to The Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." How appropriate, he thought.

Sunday had indeed been a day of rest—or more precisely, recovery. After leaving the airport Saturday evening, Sean called his cell phone. It was actually the third time he had called that day, so Ben already knew what he wanted. He had hesitated a few seconds when he saw Sean's name come up on the caller ID window but decided to answer knowing full well that Sean would just keep calling. Sean wanted the same thing he wanted as every Saturday night approached: a wingman for the bar scene. Even though Ben had seen Sean's complete ineptitude around women, and he knew his skills weren't much better, he went along because he was too brain-dead from studying to formulate a decent excuse. He also continued to hold on to the fading hope that somewhere in the alcohol-induced haze, Ms. Right was just waiting to be discovered.

Predictably, Saturday night went as most did. They ventured from bar to bar consuming more alcohol. Each time they moved on, one of them would offer an excuse as to why that just wasn't the bar in which to meet women. Too loud. Too dark. Too stuck up. Whatever. Eventually the excuses turned to self-criticism as the downing effects of the alcohol overcame the natural levels of male testosterone. *I'm just shy around women. We're getting too old*, et cetera. By the end of the night, Sean was all but crying on Ben's shoulder as he described the desert wasteland of his love life. He had told Ben that he loved him, like friends are apt to do when intoxicated. Ben had done his best to console him in that drunk, empathic state where platonic love between two grown men seems easy to express and somehow substitutes for the bleak prospects of finding lasting love with a beautiful woman.

Then they ordered pizza. Predictable.

Late Sunday morning, with his head feeling like it was filled with concrete, Ben had stumbled out of his bedroom to find Sean still passed out on the couch. After that first painful opening of the eyes, Sean had quickly gathered his things and left without any recognition of the previous night's conversation. Both knew that nothing had to be said—it had all been said before.

So, as Ben faced the beginning of another work week, he found The Stones' lyrics not only appropriate, but somehow consoling. Like he wasn't alone. *Hell, if Mick can't get any, how am I supposed to?*

He left the radio on while he showered and shaved for some entertainment. As he finished getting dressed, David Lee Roth belted out "Panama." This got Ben's blood flowing a little bit, so he turned off the radio when the song ended. That way, the same tune would be stuck in his head for the rest of the day. *There's nothing worse than going to work with a Tom Petty song clanging around my brain*. Most people his age didn't listen to music from the 20th century, but this was his parents' music and what he had grown up listening to. Strange what implants itself in the accepting minds of youth.

After his usual breakfast omelet and a banana, Ben blasted out of his apartment and locked the door behind him. He was running a little bit late and was hoping traffic would be light. He hated being late for anything, especially work. Just before he reached the car door, he realized he had forgotten his gun, so he went back quickly to retrieve it. Not that he would ever have to use it, but the rules said he had to carry it. It spent most of his workday confined to the darkness of his desk drawer.

As he joined the parade of other cars and their occupants going to work, he noticed that the sun was just breaking over downtown, or "uptown" as Charlotteans called it. It was another incredible display of nature's ability to invigorate the senses and lift the spirit. Despite his generally poor attitude since waking up, he was starting to feel a little lighter and he marveled at how something as simple as a beautiful sunrise and a favorite song could have that effect.

On his way to work his cell phone rang. It was Sean, probably late as usual.

He answered with their customary greeting for each other: "Yo!"

"Yo! Hey, I'm running a little late. Can you tell Beeker I got stuck on 485 because of a wreck?"

"Haven't you used that one before?"

"Yeah, but it's been a while. He knows I'm full of shit anyway. It's part of my charm." Sean was right about one thing: everybody knew he was full of shit.

"Bruh, you're either gonna have to come up with some more excuses or get up earlier. Someday, your *charm* is gonna wear off and he's gonna drop you in the grease." *Drop you in the grease? Where the hell did that phrase come from?*

"I think I'll stop and get Krispy Kreme. That always works."

Ben rolled his eyes but was secretly somewhat jealous of Sean's ability to talk his way into or out of just about anything. It was not a gift he possessed. Nonetheless, he promised to do his best and run cover for Sean until his delayed arrival, then hung up.

* * *

He whipped into the parking lot with three minutes to spare. Not bad, he thought, considering his lethargic start to the day.

As he walked into the building, he couldn't help but wonder, as he had done so many times before, why government buildings had to be so bland. Everything was painted various shades of beige or cream, or kind of an off-white color with some gray tones thrown in for flare. *Maybe the interior decorator was making government wages, too*.

His reverie was interrupted by Cecil Quinlan sitting at his desk as Ben walked past. "Hey Yankee." As the only member of the office who hailed from a northern state, Ben had quickly been dubbed "Yankee," a most derogatory term in the South. "Ready for another exciting week of moving paper around your desk?"

"Hey Quin. How'd your Heels do this weekend?" He asked, knowing full well they had given up a comfortable halftime lead and lost to Clemson.

"Hey, at least we got a team. Do y'all even play football up North? I don't believe I caught the highlights of the *RUT*-gers game on Sportscenter." He drew out the name of Ben's alma mater in such a way as to insult both the school and the mention of its name.

Ben continued toward his desk, chuckling and knowing full well the war of words that inevitably ensued each week between him and all of his coworkers was just getting started. At first, he had taken these constant insults personally but quickly realized that it was a sure sign they liked him.

Just as he sat down, Beeker strode up to his desk. Jack Grissom was his real name, but Ben and Sean had secretly named him Beeker after surfing YouTube videos of old clips from the Muppet Show one day. They had both noticed his uncanny resemblance to that particular Muppet due to his long, thin face, upturned lower lip, and fuzzy red hair. They had laughed hysterically at this realization and the name stuck.

Grissom was one of the Assistant Special Agents in Charge of the Charlotte office of the FBI. Ben's opinion of him in the early part of his tenure here had been pretty high, but lately it was trending downwards. He was generally pleasant and treated all of his employees fairly, but he always felt that Grissom was constantly trying to overcome his personal appearance. He had no commanding presence, but he did possess a deceptively sharp wit, and on occasion, he was known to use that wit as a razor to cut someone down to size in an effort to assuage his own personal insecurity.

They had, on occasion, had their disagreements. It was during these few times that Ben had seen a very controlling side of Grissom, one that did not tolerate any form of insubordination. One particular disagreement arose from Ben's reaction to something Grissom did. He had told his entire division that cases would be handed out in order, rather than favoring any of the more senior agents when an especially tough case came along. Within a week, just such a case was assigned to the division, and even though Ben and Sean were up to bat, Grissom had assigned it to Quinlan and his partner, Al Byers. Ben's penchant for wearing his emotions on his sleeve reared its head and he had openly displayed a look of frustration in front of Grissom and several coworkers, which absolutely set Grissom on fire. He brought Ben into his office and made it abundantly clear that nobody would

question his decision-making. Ben had apologized without really meaning it and left the office in a hurry. It was the biggest chink in Grissom's armor—at least that Ben had found so far.

"Where's your buddy?" Grissom asked, with no need to elaborate.

"He called and said there's an accident on 485 and he's stuck in traffic."

"He's recycling excuses now? He damn well better have doughnuts when he walks through that door." Ben had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as Beeker spun on his heel and walked away.