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Chapter One

Blood exploded in a bright red spray when the brown, barnacle-covered shell smacked loudly into the man's head. THWOCK! The man's eyes rolled back into his head and a big gash just above his temple revealed his skull, glistening with a patina of blood. None of the people watching were paying much attention to the dying man with a big hole in his head. Their attention was focused on the other man standing next to the dead guy.

That would be the guy with the shell.

Snapping out of his stupor, Tad stumbled down into the gin-clear shallow water, the bottom visible even at night. "Ramon, I think you beat him to death with... that shell. That's a new one, even for you."

"Not just any shell..." he continued, "...a Queen Conch shell. Definitely not just any shell. The shell most associated with the Florida Keys and this Shangri La called the Bahamas. It stirs the imagination and fires the passions. It'll also hold a door open, but that's another story. Can you hear me, O'Brien? Are you listening? Conch - rhymes with conk - like what I just did to your head."

O'Brien heard nothing. His head was six inches under water and no bubbles were emanating from within. No input from O'Brien.

"Shell, I proclaim that you are a killer. You have killed Mr. O'Brien, who needed to be killed and hence is such and done is the deed. You and I have become one. We are brothers of the molluskial dark arts."

Murphy looked at Tad impatiently. Tad replied, "You know how he is. The spirit moves him."

Murphy grumbled, "Something better move us all."

A red stain spread around the vicinity of O'Brien's cabeza muerta throughout the water.

Murphy cleared his throat and said, "Ramon, you know the difference between killers and murderers? Killers are the ones that have not been caught yet. And we have not yet been caught. Murderers have been convicted. We have not and I would prefer to keep it that way. Now, please pull your head out of your fourth point of contact or we are going to be stuck in a Bahamian jail with Jamaican drug runners using us for blowup dolls. We have to go, Ramon. Tad, you and Ramon get to the boat and we will get to the sea plane."

"Ah, yes," Ramon said, "There's that. Time to leave," he said slowly, "...but the shell comes with us. It's all about synergy. Working together. Man and nature. Mano y Shello."

Tad exhaled in a measured breath nodded, "Goes on the mantle. Let's go home, Conch Killer."

"Conch Killer? I like it!" Ramon said. His face brightened as he washed the blood off the edge of the shell. "Time to go."

It was then that they watched the big Morris Yacht motoring swiftly out of the channel and headed toward the Gulf Stream.

Their way home was leaving without them. Great. What now?



Chapter Two

(Alexandria, Virginia) The smell of pizza wafted through the night air, assaulting the senses of the throngs of people on the sidewalk. Don Vito's was a favorite spot, just five blocks from the waterfront on King Street. The young couple walked down here from their brownstone, just like many nights before. The handsome young man nodded at the busy cashier and called out, "Hey Vinnie! Give us the usual. Try not to screw it up again."

The dark, hairy man was throwing dough into the air. He feigned outrage, "That's right. Keep it up. I'm *this close* to putting in a call to Lenny Two Fingers. Then - Bada Bing! You - at the bottom of the Potomac... and then your woman, she'll be mine. That's right, keep it up." He smiled as he wiped his hands on his flour and sauce-covered apron and began to ladle pizza sauce onto the dough.

The young man walked behind the counter and gave the man a hug. "How you doing, Vinnie?"

"Fine, Johnny, just fine. How's that beautiful fiancé of yours?"

"Jesus, Vinnie! You know we're not engaged. Why do you keep embarrassing Elizabeth like that?"

“Why do you keep embarrassing the family? And yourself, you putz. Put a ring on that girl’s finger. Don’t wait too long. Now go sit down. I’ll have it out soon.”

Johnny kissed the elderly Italian woman at the cash register on the cheek, and went to his girlfriend.

The couple sat and chatted. They talked about whatever young people talked about when they were in love. The future was certain, the stars were in their proper alignment and all was right with the world.

The girl’s eyes sparkled as she stared into Johnny’s face. He leaned over and whispered a private joke in her ear, causing peals of laughter. Johnny was sure he had found the woman with whom he would grow old. He had slowly allowed their relationship to grow, not rushing it. He was careful. He had to be. He was her bodyguard.

But on this night, fate was fickle and Johnny was paying more attention to Elizabeth the love of his young life rather than Elizabeth, the subject he was guarding. And that was bad.

Johnny had come to let his guard down more and more. When he looked around, he saw the world through the eyes of a goggle-eyed fool in love rather than through suspicious, probing eyes. He knew he would marry Elizabeth in time, but for now he enjoyed her company. In fact, it was all he craved. He was losing his edge. No, losing is not the right word. He was *shedding* his bodyguard skin and trying hard to be a good boyfriend.

Never had Johnny made such a big mistake. He had become complacent. And tonight, Elizabeth would pay. Dearly.

• • •

“*What a handsome couple,*” the old lady thought. Edna Stribling had lived in Alexandria for forty-six years. Each night Edna would walk down to the Potomac River and back. She would carefully make her way up the sidewalk to King Street and turn right. The night air was pleasant and she enjoyed the ambience.

She had seen a lot in her seventy-eight years. Edna was what you could call a “spunky old bird.” She had been in New York when the boys came back from the Big War in '45. “*That was a hell of a party,*” she thought, “*the good old days.*” She was twenty years old, and one good looking broad. At least that was what her soon-to-be husband told her. Plus, Benjamin liked her ta-ta's.

Benjamin Stribling was a Marine captain who had successfully led a company of Marines at Guadalcanal. He was a handsome devil, a decorated war hero and best of all, awfully rich. Benjamin's father, Ernest Stribling, had built a thriving company from the ground up. Edna did not know exactly what they did, but it had something to do with selling mechanical parts to the military and other government agencies.

Edna met Benjamin at a USO dance. After seven dances, four gin martinis and two hours in the sack, Benjamin was convinced he had found his dream girl. Six months later they were married. They had an exciting and fulfilling fifty-one years of marriage, until Benjamin's heart gave out while sweeping off the front walk.

Edna had lived the last five years alone in their Georgetown brownstone, making the most of each and every day. That's why she liked to walk at night – because it made her feel *alive* and *young*.

As Edna watched the young couple come out of the pizza parlor, she smiled. Young people in love always had a distinct glow – an aura of wonder and promise that radiated from the way they smiled and held each other. Benjamin held her like that fifty-eight years ago on this very street. Edna silently wished the unknown couple fifty-one years together as they made their way to the waterfront.

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Elizabeth and Johnny had a very non-traditional start, as a young couple in love. Usually on a campus, boy sees girl, boy meets girl, boy and girl decide they kind of like each other, and they end up in the sack for two months. If they can stand each other then, the relationship has real promise. Liz and Johnny had a different story.

Liz was a junior at Georgetown, majoring in economics. Liz's father was Bradford Wallington Forbish, IV, CEO and majority stockholder of Forboco Petrochemical, Incorporated. Their family fortune was substantial and they lived at an old Virginia plantation house named Knottywood.

"If you don't have a name for your spread, you ain't shit." Forbish liked to give the image of the rough and tumble oilman rising to the top of the ranks, but sadly it was not true. Forbish was not much more than a flaming ass and a bumbling fool. He inherited the petroleum company from his father fifteen years ago. Old man Titus Forbish, on his deathbed, debated on whether to flip a coin to decide who gets the fortune – his asshole son or some goddamn cat foundation. Fortunately for Bradford, the old man croaked before finding any loose change that he could reach.

The Forbish's enjoyed the perks of the elite upper crust of the great American society. Bradford and his wife, Bootsy, raised four children with the help of seven full time servants, two child psychologists, an assload of prescription medicine, and one mistress. The medicine was for Bootsy; the mistress for Bradford.

In the world of high finance and petrochemicals, Bradford fancied himself as a hard bastard. Everyone in his social circle knew him to be a buffoon, but he had far too many millions to prevent anyone from pointing this out to him.

The Forboco Petrochemical Building was located in Dallas, staffed by eighteen hundred men and women who dutifully managed the business, mostly in the absence of its owner. Bradford had an enormous teleconferencing system set up in his office at Knottywood, allowing him access to all the Forboco executives at a moment's notice.

The wonders of modern communications technology practically negated the necessity of him ever going to his own corporate headquarters at all. Despite this, Bradford periodically flew out to Dallas under the auspices of board meetings, networking and briefings from the underlings. What really happened was quail hunting, expensive liquor and high dollar whores from the chemical pimps that wooed Forbish's business.

Mostly, Forbish spent his time in Northern Virginia. Texas made him nervous. Those Texans seemed to look right through a man and spot bullshit from a mile away. Around Northern Virginia and D.C., *everyone* was full of bullshit. The city ran on bullshit. Bullshit was not only tolerated, but was at certain levels to be admired. That is, so long as there was some money to back it up. So Bradford Wallington Forbish, IV was in his element, as he was as full of shit as a Christmas turkey and rich as a sheik.

Bradford had attracted the attention of most of the prominent men and women in society. Powerful men and women snickered when he entered rooms. He sat on several prominent

advisory panels. He was ridiculed at society soirées and in Capitol Hill cloakrooms. He had arrived.

He was just about on top of his game, when disaster fell on the Forbish household.

Forbish received an urgent call from Phillip Dixon. Dixon was the Chief of Security for the vast Forbish Empire. Forbish was entertaining two senators and a handful of government executives from the EPA at his manor. It was amazing what a few cans of Beluga caviar and a little personal attention could do to help block an obscure environmental bill.

A small Pilipino servant wearing an immaculate white uniform brought out a phone and handed it to Forbish. “Sir, its Mister Dixon.”

“The tray. goddammit, bring out the goddamn phone on the goddamn tray. Shit.” he hissed. But he didn’t hiss too long, because when Phillip Dixon called, he knew to stop what he was doing and listen. It was seldom good news, but always important.

“Go ahead, Phillip. What is it?”

“I’m on the way to the big house. Be there in fifteen minutes. We need to talk. It’ll take the rest of the day.”

“Knottywood. The name of the friggin’ house is Knottywood. Will you stop calling it the Big House! (pause) All day? No sh...You want to tell me what this is about?”

“Fifteen minutes.” And he hung up. Most people wondered how Dixon could get away with talking to the old man like that. After all, Phillip Dixon was only five feet, six inches tall. He was in perfect shape, though. He graduated from the top of his class at MIT, and went on to serve six years in Marine Corps Force Recon. He excelled in martial arts and enjoyed competing in ironman competitions just for fun.

Phillip was recognized early as a talented man, and Bradford was looking for just such a man to help solve a few “problems” in his ranks. And Phillip Dixon was black, very black. This made him quite unique in an industry that still was lily white.

Dixon quickly rose to take over all of Bradford’s security operations, including Knottywood. He was bright, effective, and best of all, feared. Bradford enjoyed boasting of how intensely loyal Dixon was, but privately he wondered. Hell, Bradford still got heebiejeebies when Dixon entered his office with that penetrating gaze. Dixon was the Obi Wan Kenobe of corporate strata - awful quite when calm, but a sonofabitch when you piss him off.

Bradford took the senator from the great state of Virginia off to the side, and said, “I’m sorry, but I just got a call from my office. My man Dixon is coming over with an urgent matter. I need to cut the meeting a little short.”

“Ah, yes! Dixon. How is he? Isn’t he the one who watches over your corporation? Capable man, eh?”

“Capable? Oh, yeah. He’s a real badass. When he shows up, someone’s ass is about to hit the fan.”

The Senator blinked a couple of times as his scotch-addled brain processed the mixed metaphor. Nothing passed the day like mixing drinks and metaphors. He cleared his throat and said, “And here he is showing up at Knottywood. What fun!”

The Conch Killers is available now in printed form and Kindle reader. Visit the author’s website to purchase copies.

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