

GATORWAY

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McCalack Thriller # 1

Eduard Meinema

Gatorway

McCalack series # 1

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*Until they become conscious
they will never rebel,
and until they have rebelled
they cannot become conscious*

**George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair)
Nineteen eighty-four**

1

“*Par aqui, par aqui...*,” the old man whispered to his much younger companion. Even though it was late at night, the high temperature had soaked their shirts with sweat. They were on the run. Scared to death they stumbled through the moist sand on the dark beach. A pile of lounge chairs, waiting for new customers that would crowd the beach in the early morning, appeared to be the only safe place to hide the package they carried. Once the package was carefully hidden in the sand underneath the chairs, the old man ordered his young companion to run as fast as he could. Then he took a chair out of another pile and laid down to rest. Out of breath as he had been chased for several hours. The younger man disappeared into the hot air of the night, while the old man waited for their pursuers. He knew he would never see the sunrise again. They were hunted by relentless men, and he could only pray his death would come soon and that his end would be quick and painless.

It only seemed seconds before three men popped up. Just as sweaty as the men they were hunting. Exhausted from running, the old man feared what was coming. An incredibly large fist tightly grasped him by the throat.

“Where’s the mail?” the tall dark man grumbled while slowly choking the old refugee. “Come on daddy; tell me where my package is.”

“*No sé,*” was all the grey Mexican could mumble.

“Yeah, “*no wanna say*” you mean. You may kiss my ass... now hurry up, I’ll give you one more chance grandpa.”

“The other man...,” the old Mexican replied while he nodded his head into the direction of the boulevard.

The three men looked into the darkness. A moonless night. Nothing to be seen on the beach, except the neon lights on the boulevard behind the small row of dunes. That’s where daily life continued. In fact, daily life just started at Miami Beach. The old man no longer participated; his life had just been cruelly ended. His lifeless body was left behind upon the lounge chair.

“Did you have a good look at the other guy?” the tall man asked.

“Yeah, scum of the street,” the man with the red curly hair replied. “A moment ago, in the streetlights, I saw a big tattoo on his shoulder. A snake.”

“Told you we should have nailed them there,” the shortest of the three men said. “Now we’ve lost the package, and we’ve lost track of the snake man.” He looked at the tall man: “Told you Theo, told you so... and don’t you think I’m going to wait for my money. You pay me as soon as we’re back at the car.”

Theo Barry emptied the old man’s pockets. He threw the wallet to the short man: “Here’s your share asshole. Now help us to clean up, we need to get out of here.”

Shorty opened the wallet and smiled. Over two hundred dollars inside. *Good hunting*, he thought. Red Curly swept the sand around the old man with a chair and then slowly walked back the way they had arrived, sweeping away all footsteps.

“See you at the parking,” he said to Theo and Shorty. Without looking back, he vanished in the darkness.

Theo grabbed another chair from the pile and dragged it behind Shorty and him through the sand. They walked in the opposite direction of Red Curly. Once they had reached the sea,

he threw the chair away into the ocean. For a short while they continued to walk through the water. Their footsteps were swallowed by the waves. Nobody would be able to trace them. Theo knew they had lost their prey. And most of all they had lost their chance to get the package. Something that would not be appreciated by the boss.

And that worried him the most.

2

Dylan Timmers woke up early. He ignored the warning on the window, a sticker informing hotel guests the air conditioning would not be working properly once the window was open. Although the ocean and the boulevard were at the other side of the building; the sounds of the street and the nearby sea entered the room. All Dylan could see was the car park across the street. Even though he had been here for just a week, he had already memorized some of the cars that were parked across from his room. Especially the old pick-up truck was an easy reference. Once red, nowadays rusty. The company's name unreadable in white faded letters. The window at the driver's seat half open and one of the headlights damaged. In fact, most of the car was damaged. But no one cared. It seemed the vehicle had been there forever.

Just a week ago Dylan arrived in the middle of the night. Flown in from Amsterdam in an airplane fully packed with tourists. He was sitting near the aisle, a seat providing him enough space to stretch his long legs every now and then. His tall body came out way above the chairs, while the two tiny people next to him were so short, the people sitting behind them may have thought the chairs were empty. It was an elderly couple sitting next to Dylan, ordering one alcoholic drink after another until the stewardess stopped serving them. With a Spanish accent the lady asked Dylan if he would be so kind to order another drink for her husband. The bald man's skull was covered with dark pigment spots. During the entire flight he just sat there, being silent and staring out of the window.

“He’s afraid of flying you know,” she said. “I don’t like him to drink much, but the drinks keep him calm.” Once the old man’s drink had been served, the lady continued: “We have been on a trip through Europe, something we always wanted to do once we would be retired. And last year we sold the shop to our children so…”

“A shop? What kind of shop did you have?” Dylan asked.

“We had a bakery. In fact, we owned four bakeries selling specials from Venezuela. We originally came from Venezuela, you know.”

“A beautiful country so I’ve heard.”

“Yes, really beautiful. But politics and economics were very hard when my husband and I were young.” She laughed. “Ha, in fact nothing has changed… We wanted to give our children a better life, offer them the best opportunities, so we moved to the United States.”

“And you’ve managed to open four shops? Impressive. You have been very successful.”

“We have been selling all kinds of special bread and pastry, and of course churros.”

“Ah yes, churros, the Spanish donut. I love them!”

“Many of the Cuban people here in Florida love churros too. But we don’t have to worry about the shops anymore. That’s all for the children,” she said. “And you; are you going to Miami for vacation?”

“Sort of. I have found a summer job as a lifeguard, or Baywatch, at Miami Beach. And I’m fond of scuba diving, so I can make a little money and then go for a dive.”

“Ooww, that’s nice. How long will you be staying?”

“My school has arranged a special internship. I may start this week and have to return to The Netherlands after three months.”

“And you live in Amsterdam?”

Dylan smiled. “No, Holland is more than just Amsterdam.”

“Oh, I know” the lady replied, “and Amsterdam is more than just coffee shops...”

“Right! I’m glad you didn’t mention tulips and wooden shoes...” Dylan laughed. “So, you don’t visit the bakeries anymore?”

“Oh yes, we do. Every week we are helping in one of the shops. It’s hard to stop working when you have worked seven days a week your entire life. You should come and visit one of our shops.” The lady looked in her purse and handed Dylan a business card. “Mister and Mrs. Guillermo, Chingu Deli,” he read out loud.

At the airport he saw the Guillermo’s entering the U.S. through the special residents’ line. Mrs. Guillermo waved at him, knowing they would be out of the airport within a few minutes. Dylan Timmers moved into the line of non-U.S. residents. A procedure which took about one and a half hour longer to enter the U.S.

About an hour later he arrived at the hotel. A nice but old building a few blocks behind the famous Ocean Drive; the boulevard well known for its pastel-colored hotels. This would be his temporary home for the next few weeks. The day after his arrival he was already scheduled to work at the beach.

After a nice cold shower, Dylan prepared to go to work. On his way to the beach, he picked up two bagels and a coffee at

Starbuck's near the beach. He walked along Ocean Drive and couldn't help smiling when he noticed the name "Netherlands Hotel". As if the homeland was following him on vacation. A young woman passed him in a hurry, jogging along the pavement while she pushed a baby-carriage in front of her. He continued his walk through the dunes, gazed at the wooden cabin of the real lifeguards, and then walked straight to the lounge chair rental. Sure, he was told to have the best summer job ever, working as lifeguard at Miami Beach. *Look out David Hasselhoff, here I come!* But the truth was he had to let out chairs to the tourists on the beach. Dragging chairs and working hard in the sun instead of staying on the lookout at a post high above all visitors at the beach.

It came as a shock rather than a surprise when he found out he was not going to be one of the tough guys on the lookout. His first reaction was to quit the job even before the first day would end. Once at work he found out how many girls were passing by, and he realized that his position down at the beach gave him an advantage of having a much closer look at the girls in their bikinis.

Within a week he enjoyed the company of the tourists. Got familiar with a few of the regular visitors and learned how to earn a few extra dollars by helping people out. This early in the morning it was very unusual to have guests. But the closer Dylan came to his work area, the more people he noticed. The place was crowded. Several police cars were parked upon the beach, around his site. A police line was blocking the entire area where Dylan was supposed to work today. As Dylan had piled up the lounge chairs himself the night before, he immediately noticed one of the chairs was pulled out. An old man was lying upon it. It seemed as if he was just lying there to rest, but the pale coloration upon his face and his open mouth indicated he was dead. The presence of all the police officers

assured Dylan the old man's death was not the result of a natural cause.

Dylan notified the police officers he had to work here. One of the officers walked to him and asked Dylan to show an ID. He looked up at Dylan. The policeman was not only surprised by Dylan's length, almost a foot taller than he was, the Dutch passport also puzzled him. Another man, almost as tall as Dylan, walked into the area behind the police line and interrupted the conversation.

"Sean McCalack, FBI," he said while showing his badge to both men.

The policeman felt uncomfortable. Not only because he had to look up at two tall men now; he also wondered what the FBI was doing here. As far as he knew, there was no indication that this murder would be more than an ordinary robbery with a tragic ending.

"What can I do for you mister McCalack?" the policeman asked.

"I will take it from here, thank you."

The policeman said "okay" but did not move.

"I will take it from here, you may go now," McCalack repeated while taking Dylan's ID out of the policeman's hands. The policeman left with reluctance, making McCalack unnoticeably grin. He quickly looked into the passport and then spoke to Dylan: "Well mister... Timmers. What brought you here today?"

"I am here for the summer. This is my summer job. I can give you the number of my temp agency..."

"Yes please. I may contact them later. Since when are you here?"

“I arrived in Miami last week.”

“A week ago? Have you seen this man before?” McCalack pointed in the direction of the dead body on the lounge chair.

“No sir. I don’t think I have seen him here before.”

“Do you have the keys of the storage?”

“Yes, I’ve got all the keys. Would you like me to open it?”

McCalack grabbed his smartphone and took a picture of the passport, returned the ID to Dylan, and walked to the storage next to the lounge chairs where the freezers with ice cream were stored. A quick look inside convinced the inspector that this place did not need an additional inspection. When he left the storage, his eyes followed the track in the sand created by the lounge chair. The track started near the chair of the dead Mexican and went all the way into the sea. All traces were either carefully erased by the murderer or swallowed by the ocean. McCalack added Dylan’s phone number to the list of contacts on his smartphone and told him to go home, or rather to go back to the hotel as the crime scene would be closed for a few more hours.

Walking back to the hotel Dylan made a call to the temp office to explain the situation. Too bad for the old guy, but this unexpected time off certainly was a terrific opportunity. Dylan’s main reason for accepting this summer job was to earn some money to go scuba diving. He rushed back to the hotel, put on some casual clothes, and went into town to arrange his first diving trip in Florida.

At a safe distance, unnoticed by the police or the nosy people who could not resist the attraction of all the police cars on the beach, Andrew Palacios watched the scene. Sitting on a low wall at the beginning of the dunes, he had a good view of the

scenery. Nobody would suspect a relation between Andrew and the crime scene. And all he had to do was to wait for the police to leave. Then he could safely return to the chair rental. Waiting was no problem for Andrew “the Anaconda”. Everybody imagined he owed his nickname to the snake which was tattooed on his arms; the tattoo started at his left arm, curling across his shoulders to his right arm. However, the reptile’s skin was painted on his body a long time after he had earned his nickname. Just like the snake he could wait endlessly for the right moment to attack his prey. Today he was not focused on catching a living prey. Today he was eager to get hold of a package. A package he had managed to hide in the sand between the piles of chairs. The old man had guarded it all night, defending it with his life. Now it was up to Andrew to make sure the old man’s death was not without a reason.

Across the street a waiter delivered pancakes and coffee to a dark, tall man on the terrace. Theo Barry grabbed his cell phone. His big fingers had some trouble typing the text message on the small keys. Texting would never be his favorite way of communicating. “*Back on trail*” was all he wrote in the message. Now he could enjoy his breakfast.

3

This morning, when he had finished shaving, Dylan had flushed the small pieces of his beard hair through the sink. “*There goes my DNA,*” he had said to himself. As if anyone would ever suspect him of committing a crime. Only a few hours later he was involved in a murder scene.

He walked to Lexington Road, the outdoor shopping mall. Hoping to see Raúl there. He could not resist stopping at the corner of Paul, the French bakery he knew from his journeys to France. It was a big surprise to find Paul’s bakery was also present here in Miami. He ordered a nice coffee with a special muffin and waited at the terrace outside for his order to be ready. Meanwhile he was looking for Raúl. It did not take long before he noticed the dark, almost black man standing on his Segway, crossing around the shops, searching for unknowing tourists. Dylan watched how Raúl found himself a new prey. As always, he drove around them faster and faster in smaller and smaller circles until it looked as if he would fall; then he would start talking.

“Hello. *Bonjour. Ciao. Oyé como va?*”

“*Bonjour,*” the French couple replied, still unaware they had been caught in a spider’s web. Raúl now continued to ask them questions in short French sentences. “Where are you from? Paris? Lyon? Marseille?”

“Bordeaux,” the woman laughed.

“Ah, Bordeaux. Beautiful city. I have got a friend there.” In fact, it did not matter which city they would mention, he would always have a friend out there. And they always liked to hear an American who knew about their hometown. Caught by a smile. Within seconds he would question them, and they would answer him without hesitation. The hotel they were staying in, the time they would be in Miami. A voluntary interrogation ending in buying tickets for bus tours and excursions. The Frenchies were lucky. Like many tourists they easily gave personal information, making themselves vulnerable to criminal activities. Lucky for them Raúl was earning his living by selling tickets. And he was doing well. Even sold tickets to Japanese tourists.

“Kyoto? Beautiful city. I have got a friend there...”

Raúl made his deal. Stepped on his Segway and moved to Dylan. Keen on new tourists, but also aware of familiar people. Raúl noticed everything upon Lexington Road.

“*Hoe gaat het met jou?*” directly followed by “How are you doing?” as if he was not sure about the question he asked in Dutch. During their first meeting Raúl had done his little performance in Dutch. But instead of telling Dylan he had “*a friend*” in Rotterdam, Dylan’s hometown, he explained Dylan about Irene, his Dutch girlfriend. He had stayed with her in Amsterdam for a few weeks, but in the end, they decided to live here in Miami. Dylan remembered how their first meeting suddenly ended. A car speeded between the chairs of the terrace, followed by three police cars. Another police car turned up at the other side of the terrace, thus blocking the escape route. The officers ran out of their cars, pointing their guns at the vehicle they just forced to stop. Shouting to the fugitives to get out of the car, hands in the air. They had to lie down on the street.

“Drugs,” Raúl said.

“How do you know?” Dylan asked.

“The number of policemen,” he said. “You see the red car across the street? And the blue one slowly driving by? All undercover agents. I know them. If there’s drugs involved there are always undercover men around.”

One of the police men directed the public to move on. Baldly giving unfriendly instructions. The only polite remark was given to Raúl. The unwritten master of Lexington Road.

That’s how their first meeting ended.

Today there were no police.

“I am fine. And how are you Raúl? Business is going well I noticed.”

Raúl laughed. “How does Irene say that... umm... *slechte mensen*... umm, sorry too many of those horrible Dutch gggh-sounds.”

“*Met slechte mensen gaat het altijd goed*... Bad people are always doing fine,” Dylan complemented.

“*Zactly*,” Raúl said pronouncing the word “exactly” in his own way.

“I need a few tips for scuba tours Raúl. Can you help me?”

“If I can’t help you, who can?”

“*Zactly*,” Dylan replied, trying to copy Raúl’s pronunciation.

Raúl sat down at the nearest table. He pulled a few business cards out of his bag. “Have you followed any PADI-courses?”

“No, but I have a two-star CMAS license. The European system. It’s comparable to the PADI level of *Advanced Open Water Diver*. And I have done a medical checkup at home. In Holland that is.”

“Okay and where do you want to go scuba diving? Along Miami’s coast, or do you prefer the reefs near the Keys?”

“I think the reefs are best for later. When I have served my job contract, I want to stay at the Keys for a few days. For now, it’s better to start in Miami.”

Raúl handed him a card of Manatee Diving.

“This is a friend of mine...”

“A friend, of course...,” Dylan interrupted.

“... *zactly*... They go diving a few miles out of the coast. Beautiful spot with a few wrecks. Many fish, and sometimes turtles. Very nice. Don’t forget to give them my name. Then I will get my commission...”

Before Dylan could thank him, his cell phone buzzed.

“McCalack. I’d like to meet you at your hotel. I need to ask you a few more questions.”

Dylan was surprised to hear the FBI agent this soon but agreed to return to his hotel as soon as possible.

“Got to go Raúl. The FBI needs my help. How about that, eh? I’ve only been here for a few days, and your country already needs me!”

“FBI? That’s serious business Dylan. What are you into?”

“Nothing. When I went to work this morning, the beach was blocked by the police. They had found a dead body. I heard them say some old Mexican was robbed and killed. Unfortunately, he was found at the chair rental where I was supposed to work today.”

“Very strange.”

“Strange? I think it’s pure coincidence the body was left at the rental.”

“I mean it is strange that the FBI is investigating this case. Usually this would be done by homicide of the local police. When the FBI is involved, it means there is a matter of national concern.”

“So?”

“So, it’s not just a robbery. Or just a murder. The people who have done this are far more dangerous than you realize right now. If anything strange happens you come to me. *Begrijp je?* Do you understand?”

“Okay, thanks for your concern. I have to go now. Say hello to Irene for me.”

“You have not even met her...”

“Not much Dutch people around here, so I like to keep in touch with anyone who *really* speaks Dutch...”

“...zactly...”

“...*P’sees!*”

“Say what?”

“*P’sees*, short for “precies”... Dutch for exactly...”

Raúl shook his head.

“Never understood why such a small country needs its own language. Such a strange language...” He stepped on his Segway and quickly mingled with the public, hunting for new prey.

4

During his walk back to the hotel, Dylan called Manatee Diving to arrange his first diving trip in Florida. During the weekends he was supposed to work. Therefore, he planned the trip on Monday. The boat would disembark at 8 AM. Rather early for a day off; but Raúl said it would be really nice, so...

The parking building, newer and higher than the hotel, was the first building he recognized. The hotel itself seemed to be one of the oldest buildings in the street. Its walls peeled grey with a touch of red and orange caused by the outlets of the rusty air conditioning unit's hanging outside each hotel room. The former garden was now paved and in use as parking lot for the hotel guests, although most guests were foreigners without a car. In front of the hotel there was a small, wooden veranda, territory of a Labrador that only seemed to live at night when the temperature was more comfortable to someone wearing a fur coat all day long. The dog did not react at all when Dylan came up the small stairway to the lobby of the hotel. The receptionist recognized him as soon as he entered the hotel lobby. In fact, he was on the look-out for Dylan: "Welcome back mister Timmers. There is someone waiting for you."

"I know," Dylan said, and he walked straight to the only man sitting in the lobby. "How can I help you mister McCalack?"

McCalack replied they had better go to Dylan's room so nobody would bother them. In fact, he did not want the receptionist to hear anything. Although McCalack also knew the walls of this hotel would not withhold anyone from listening to their conversation.

McCalack stared out of the window. Looking into the parking building Dylan already was familiar with.

“Mister Timmers...,” he started, “what school do you attend?”

“The hotel management school,” Dylan replied. “That’s why I got this job.”

“Shouldn’t you be working in a hotel then, instead of dragging chairs around the beach?”

“It’s not an internship, but a job for the summer.”

“But you said the job was arranged by your school?”

“That’s right. There’s a special committee that arranges jobs all around the world for anyone who wants to work abroad during the summer.”

“Special committee? When we first met, you gave me the number of a temp agency...?”

“The committee members are only intermediates. They cooperate with several temp agencies so they can assure us they will find a job. Even though the job is not always what they say it is...”

McCalack stared silently at Dylan.

“...they offered me a job as lifeguard, but instead I’m working at the chair rental. It’s okay though. Much more to be seen and much better contact with cute girls...”

McCalack did not react. He now stared into the darkness of the car park. Two boys were trying to open one of the parked cars. Clearly, they did not have much experience and ran as fast as they could when the car alarm went off. However, the two burglar students did not bother him. McCalack had noticed a man in one of the parked cars above the level the boys were “doing their job”. He had seen him the moment he entered

Dylan's hotel room. At first, he thought the man was just sitting there, waiting for someone. Now that he had been observing him for a while, he realized it was strange to wait for someone in a parking building. It seemed more logical that the man was on the lookout. Observing someone. Not Dylan Timmers though as the man was on the top level of the parking, looking straight forward to the floor above Dylan's hotel room.

"Are there any other students of your school staying in this hotel mister Timmers?"

"No. Not for I know."

"Have you met any of the other hotel guests? Maybe spoken with someone?"

"I hardly see anyone around. Most of the time the receptionist is the only one around."

"Alright. That's all for now. I will call you if I need some more information. Enjoy your summer job mister Timmers."

McCalack left the room and directly went to the reception. The tiny Latino at the reception merely looked like a hip-hop artist. But he appeared to be an adequate receptionist and quickly informed McCalack about the guests in the hotel and especially about the people staying in the rooms on the floor above Dylan Timmers' room. McCalack studied the names for a while. A family from Pennsylvania, a young man from Canada, honeymooners from France and a couple from Alaska.

"*Ah-las-kaah*," he said to himself. After seeing "The Proposal", the movie with Sandra Bullock, he always had to repeat the name of the state and pronounce it like she did: "*Ah-las-kaah!*"

He did not see any familiar names or suspicious people. Nevertheless, he stored the names and ID numbers in his cell phone. Old habits never die even though his classic notebook was replaced by a smartphone. And although he had no reason to suspect a link between the cases he was working on, he decided to check out the man in the parking after all. He passed the sleeping Labrador on the porch and walked straight to the parking. A dark man on a Segway passed him by. “*Raúl*,” he said to himself. Repeating names. Another old habit. As if it would help him to remind him about the people he had met. Or seen.

More than half of the parking lots were available. Sean McCalack took the stairs to the top level. The man he was looking for was still there. When McCalack moved closer, the man started the engine and slowly pulled off. Not because he had noticed McCalack, but because the people he was watching had just left their hotel room. McCalack had also noticed the lights in one of the hotel rooms went down. He walked to one of the parked cars and faked as if he was searching for his car keys. The man drove away slowly; unaware he gave McCalack all the time he needed to note the license plate. One call to the bureau would be enough to know the identity of this man.

Waiting for the results of the license plate, McCalack counted the windows to find out which hotel room the man had been watching. Now he was sure about the people the man was following. The French couple, mister, and Mrs. Solange. Although, that was the name they had used to make their reservation. Nothing was certain any more in this grim world. Certainly not identities.

“Mac?”

“Surprise me.”

“The license plate is registered in the name of Hill’s Detectives. A detective agency based in Miami. All detectives are former police officers. A very solid track record and useful references. There are no records you should worry about.”

“I never worry. Just like to know everything. What records do we have?”

“I will send the files to your phone.”

“Okay. I also need data on a few French tourists. I have made a note of their passport numbers; you will receive them within a few seconds.” Once McCalack had forwarded the pictures of the passport, he walked back to his car, still parked in front of the hotel. Before he stepped into the car he felt his cell phone buzzing. Instead of the files he expected to receive, a new text message appeared.

Another dead body had been found at the beach. Upon the dead man’s body, the police had found a wallet. The personal belongings of the old Mexican who was found dead earlier this morning. This could mean it was a simple robbery after all. But that would not explain the second corpse. McCalack had a gut feeling. But feelings didn’t count; he needed facts.

The Labrador did not bother to move out of the shadow. He had his tongue as far out of his mouth as possible, trying to get rid of the unbearable heat. The dog did not even bother to stand up and take a look at the special agent.

5

“Bye, bye, Meggie,” Dylan ended his Skype session with his baby sister, Megan. Only five years old and not aware of what Dylan was doing on the other side of the ocean. “When I’m back at home, I will take you to Euro Disney, Meggie. That will be fun, eh? See you soon. Bye, bye now.”

Before closing the laptop, he checked his emails. “*Yeah, more great news*” he said to himself. “*Let me see, I have won another lottery I’ve never heard of and once again some Nigerian attorney wants to transfer a few million dollars to my bank account. I’m such a lucky guy....*” He deleted the spam mails, closed the laptop, and secured it in the small safe. McCalack had told him the police were ready with their investigations. Without reporting the temp agency, he decided to return to the beach.

It was passed noon. The temperature had risen to an unpleasant level. The dark clouds kept the humidity high, making breathing a challenge. “*It’s about time Florida should introduce siestas. What am I doing here?*” Dylan dragged himself through the burning sand. Finally reaching the chair rental. This morning the site was busier than a shopping mall on Black Friday, now completely deserted. Dylan opened the storage room. Put the flags on the roof. That was all he had to do to let people know he was open. He took some chairs from one of the piles, placed them near the storage and walked back inside. A few giggling schoolgirls walked by in their bikinis. They stopped for an ice cream and a flirt with the tall foreigner. After the first chairs were taken Dylan started taking more

chairs from the second pile. While cleaning the next series of chairs an old plastic bag came out of the sand underneath the pile. It looked like an ordinary piece of garbage, left behind by people who had bought something at a supermarket. Dylan felt there was something inside. Before he would throw the bag into a garbage can, he checked what was inside. He found a package. A small box fully packed with tape. There was a typed address label in the middle of the package, but no address of the person who send it. The address label only said: "Ocean Shore Restaurant, Fort Myers." Dylan decided to keep the package in the storage until someone would pop up and ask for it.

6

8 PM. No more customers, the chairs were all piled up again. Dylan went back to his hotel. He walked along Ocean Boulevard, trying to pass the obtrusive waiters who were luring all the people passing by to have a lovely meal for only \$ 3.99 in their restaurant. Only one week in Miami and he already knew most of the waiters. Dylan didn't stop. He walked on to the hotel where he was staying. The lobby was empty. Not even the Latino was around.

In his hotel room he took the laptop out of the safe. Even though the hotel was cheap, the internet provider was good and fast. Within seconds Dylan was scrolling through several web pages. It only took him a minute or so to find the address of the restaurant which name was typed on the mysterious package. A restaurant in Fort Myers.

He quickly tried to remind himself of who had been renting chairs at the beach. But he did not remember anyone mentioning living in, or passing by from, Fort Myers. Then again, it might just as well be someone who had to deliver the package and had forgotten about it. It was securely packed, wrapped up in bubble paper, and hardly larger than his hand. The substance inside felt soft and hardly weighed more than one kilo.

Dylan dialed the phone number of the restaurant using the phone in his hotel room. A young lady answered: "Ocean Shore Restaurant how may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Dylan Timmers from The Netherlands... umm Miami... umm... I have found a package with the name of your

restaurant upon it and umm... what would you like me to do with it?"

The person at the other side of the line waited a little while, puzzled by this strange conversation. Then carefully inquired: "What kind of package, sir?"

"A small package. Wrapped in bubble paper. I have found it on the beach..."

"And what is inside this package?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked inside" Dylan answered while he suddenly realized how strange this conversation was.

"Well, if this... package is addressed to Ocean Shore Restaurant, Fort Myers, you may as well send it to us."

"Yes... Yes, of course you are right. I will do so."

"And... mister Timmers? May I have your phone number, just in case...?"

Dylan gave his phone number to the girl on the telephone. Then slammed himself in the face while he realized the stupidity of his action. Why would a restaurant be missing such a small package? Any goods or food they used would be delivered in boxes or packed on pallets. Anything the size of a glove would never be missed. He laid the package upon his bed. Checked his diary on his cell phone. A message popped up that told him to confirm his appointment for the wreck dive.

"*Shit*," he said to himself. "*The Scuba tour*." He still had to confirm the appointment for the wreck diving next week. He made a call to Manatee Diving, the scuba tour office. An answering machine informed him the office was closed for the moment but would be open at 9PM. Dylan knew the harbor was nearby and decided to walk to the office. He always felt more comfortable going diving with familiar people and so it would

be better if he met his future dive buddies tonight instead of next Monday. He locked the laptop and the package in the hotel room safe and went out of his room.

While he walked down the stairs he wondered why he stored the package in the safe as well. As someone obviously did not care, leaving it behind at the beach, there would not be any reason for Dylan to be more careful with it. He didn't bother; he had no intention of going back into his room right now. He had other things on his mind; the scuba tour office was waiting...

*

Across the hotel room, in an almost deserted parking area, Sean McCalack was sitting in his car, observing two hotel rooms. The first one was just darkened and left by Dylan Timmers. The other one was one story higher. A French couple was arguing in their room. Arguing about something Sean McCalack did not know about. But that was not what bothered him. The unknown reason they were observed by a detective agency worried him; as the office told him there were no files on the Solange family, nor any reports on the detective agency. He could not imagine, nor accept the fact that his service did not have a track record on this agency as sooner or later any detective agency was interesting to them.

“Let's call it a day” he said to himself. Just one more look at the hotel room below before he would return to his own motel room. No hotels for McCalack. He needed a secure place with his car as close as possible.

Just before he would leave, he noticed the lights in Dylan's hotel room went back on again and although he had met Dylan

only twice, he knew one thing for sure. The unknown man entering the room was not Dylan Timmers...

7

Manatee Tours. Dylan had found the office of the scuba tour operator. Although, office was much more of a compliment than the small cabin deserved. It merely looked as if a truck had lost a container between the boats. Inside there only were two chairs, a desk and obviously a phone and internet. The cabin was still closed, but a boat was coming into the harbor, directly heading for the place Dylan was standing.

“Hey there, can you grab the line?” the captain asked with a British accent.

They moored the boat. A group of six scuba tourists debarked and told Dylan about their experiences along the Florida shore. “We’ve had some terrific dives,” one of the divers said to Dylan. “The captain has all kinds of the latest diving gear. Great guy!”

“Can’t wait till it’s my turn,” Dylan said.

“When will you be joining us?” the captain asked.

“Next Monday, I had to confirm the appointment and pay a deposit.”

“Okay, follow me into Buck’s palace,” the captain said and started walking to the small cabin.

“Buck’s palace?”

“Sorry lad, I forgot to introduce myself. Buck Winter at your service!”

“So, you have named your office after yourself...?”

“Well, actually... did you take a good look at the sign?”

Only now Dylan noticed the two flags underneath the company's name. The official dive flag and the British flag. "Ah, you're British. So, it's *Buckingham Palace*, right?"

Buck laughed: "Welcome to my shed. My palace is your palace!"

The cabin had been closed all day, and the temperature inside had now reached the ideal situation for any reptilian. For Dylan it was a signal to wait outside.

Buck handed him a handwritten receipt. "Okay son, I'll see you Monday. Eight sharp at the locker rooms behind the office. We will need some time to arrange a dive suit and your gears."

"You know I also need a buddy, don't you?" Dylan asked to be sure.

"No problem. We will be with a group of six. I will pair you up with a buddy. Sure, you don't want a cup of tea?"

"No thanks, I saw some kind of retro diner down the road. I'm gonna have a bite there. See you Monday."

Dylan walked down the pier and noticed the other sign: "Beware the manatee." He looked back at the company's sign. "Ah, the British and their humor, *Man at tea...*"

8

The Ocean Shore Restaurant was an established name. Well known by the locals for its seafood and highly appreciated for its view by tourists. Unlike most seafood restaurants the interior was not decorated in marine style, nor like an imitation tropical paradise. Instead, the famous Ocean Shore Restaurant showed an astonishing collection of modern art.

Candy Kramer had been coming to the Ocean Shore since her childhood. Thanks to all the visits she had paid to the restaurant with her parents, she knew the owners, the Esteban family, very well. Nowadays she was working at the restaurant, but she hardly ever saw the old Estebans. The eldest son, Juan Esteban, once Candy's classmate at high school, had recently become the manager of the restaurant. Although the Estebans were a respected family and appreciated members of the community in Fort Myers, Juan had always been an outsider. And even though it was logical that Juan, being the oldest of the three sons, would become the manager; many people would have preferred the second son, Ramirez Esteban, to be in charge. Rumor had it, that thanks to Ramirez, a wizard in the kitchen and a skillful manager on the sideway, the Ocean Shore Restaurant had kept its quality and reputation, while Juan, so it was said, was managing everything but the restaurant. Many people also guessed that the activities of Juan had led to the disappearance of the youngest of the Esteban brothers, Jaime. He had left the elderly house a few years ago at the age of seventeen and nobody, not even his parents, had heard of him ever since.

If other jobs would have been available, Candy would have grabbed her chance. But for now, the job at the Ocean Shore was a must to survive. She would have loved to study at the university, but the unforeseen death of her father had led to a financial catastrophe in the Kramer family. The insurance company stated that her father had committed suicide and refused to pay. There was hardly enough money to survive and no money at all to go to a university. One of the reasons, or maybe the main reason, she did not understand Juan Esteban's attitude. His family belonged to the wealthiest people in Florida.

They could offer him everything he wanted. Any university would have loved to see him coming, a whiz kid with a golden future. But Juan had chosen otherwise. Candy did not have a choice. Fate had decided for her.

Just like every night in the tourist season the restaurant was completely filled with guests. Servers were running from table to kitchen and back. Chief Ramirez managed the staff in the kitchen. Manager Juan was managing himself.

Tonight, Candy's mind was not concentrated on the job. A simple, somewhat stupid phone call ruled her thoughts. A call about a package. A small package nobody usually would care about. So why did this stranger bother? Anything needed in the kitchen was delivered by trucks. Fresh seafood. Drinks. Everything came in large quantities. But lately Candy had noticed that Juan received special deliveries. Small packages especially delivered for him. And then there were those strangers, appearing late at night when all the staff had gone home. These strangers only dropped by on nights when these special deliveries were made... it all appeared to be more than just a coincidence.

She knew Juan would react to the note she had written. It was the greediness in his voice that surprised her.

“Who is Dylan Timmers, Candy? And where can I find him?”

“Hello to you too boss... I don't know anything about Dylan Timmers. Just picked up the phone and made a note for you.”

“Did he ask for me?”

“Why would he?”

“Don't be a smartass, Candy. Did he mention my name or not?”

“No.”

“Then what did he want?”

“There's a phone number on your note, give him a call.”

“What's your problem bitch?” He pulled her by the arm but immediately released her when his brother walked up to them.

“Table seven is ready to serve Candy,” Ramirez said while he looked his brother in the eyes. Candy did not care to answer; she walked straight into the kitchen to pick the order. When she came back, carrying three plates, she saw Juan and Ramirez quarreling with each other.

A few minutes later she returned to pick up the last two plates. Ramirez was gone but she heard Juan making a phone call behind the bar. There was too much noise in the restaurant to hear the entire conversation, yet she picked up a few words that disturbed her.

Juan was on the phone. He told the person he was calling to do anything necessary to retrieve the package from Dylan Timmers. That did not sound good. Not good at all. What kind of business was Juan into? Whatever it was, it wasn't good to Dylan, whoever the poor guy might be. She was in doubt. Should she warn him? But then again, what if he was one of the bad guys too?

“Candy, table twelve is ready,” Ramirez was expanding his territory and was now also managing the waiters.

“I need to go to the toilet Ramirez; can you ask Natalee to take over?”

Ramirez never made a problem. Problems are there to be solved he always said. But now he was not comfortable with the situation. It was not only the hot weather; something was brewing inside this restaurant. He grumbled: “Okay, hurry up. I’ll send Natalee.”

Candy ran to the toilet and typed a text message for Dylan Timmers. Before sending the message, she realized it would be easy for anyone to trace her and instead of her own cell phone it would be better to use the phone of the restaurant. She sneaked into the office behind the reception. Quickly made a phone call and, somehow relieved, Dylan did not answer in person, left a message on the voice mail. As quickly as possible she ran back to help Natalee.

9

Dylan was still laughing about the ketchup smiley drawn on his plate at Johnny's Rocket Deli. The retro style burger restaurant knew how to entertain its customers. When he entered his hotel room, his own smile vanished abruptly. It looked as if people had been fighting in his room. The temperature had risen to an unpleasant level. The air conditioning had stopped because the window was open. The room was a mess. Clothes all over the place. All drawers were thrown out of the cabinet. He walked to the closet to check the safe when suddenly a man started talking behind him.

"Don't touch anything, Dylan," McCalack said. "I want to have the place searched for evidence."

Relieved to find McCalack standing there and not some kind of criminal, Dylan asked: "What has happened? Did the hurricane season start early this year?"

McCalack grinned. "Hurricanes are predictable. Burglary never is... I noticed someone entering your room..." Saying this, McCalack immediately realized he had confirmed he was watching Dylan. A mistake he had never made before. Choosing his words more carefully, he continued: "I had... parked my car in the building across the street. I was just about to leave when I saw a man going through your stuff. So, I ran over here to catch him. But as soon as I came in, he opened the window and jumped out. I thought he might have broken a leg because we're three stories high, so I ran down to pick him up. By the time I arrived downstairs he was gone. Incredible, I really thought he wouldn't be able to walk anymore."

Dylan felt the buzzing of his cell phone. He did not answer the call but soon felt another beep that confirmed he had a new voice mail message. “So, you were chasing an acrobat. We should contact Cirque du Soleil for suspects...”

“I don’t think he had time to steal anything, but if you’re missing something I’d like to know.”

“I keep anything valuable in the hotel safe. I can tell it has not been opened. So, I don’t think he has taken anything. Was it an ordinary burglar?”

“I don’t know. You tell me, Dylan. You can tell me.”

“How should I know? I haven’t seen the guy. Don’t even know what he looked like.”

“For what I have seen, it was a rather small man. South American, I guess. Maybe a few years older than you are...” McCalack hesitated as he did not want to reveal too many details. “...and a big tattoo. Sounds familiar?”

“Well, I have seen many Cubans and Mexicans around here. Many of them have tattoos all over their body. So, I wouldn’t know. But you make it sound as if he was looking for something *in particular*...”

McCalack couldn’t tell if Dylan was telling lies to him or not. He thought Dylan was acting a bit nervous, but he was not the only one with sweat on his face. The temperature in the room was still rising and they were both sweating. “Maybe... what do you keep in your safe?”

“My laptop, a little bit of extra money...nothing special.” He decided he would not mention the package he had found on the beach. The reaction of the girl at the restaurant made him believe it was not important. “Is it okay if I close the window? Would be nice if the air conditioning could do its job...”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. The young receptionist introduced a police officer who came to investigate the scene for traces.

“This may take an hour or two. You can wait downstairs if you like,” McCalack said to Dylan.

“Okay, I’ll be down if you need me.” The receptionist and Dylan both stepped into the elevator.

“I am sorry for the trouble this may cause,” the young Latino said. “Is there anything missing?”

“No, thank you. It seems the FBI officer was just in time. I don’t miss anything.”

“FBI? For a burglary?” the receptionist was sincerely surprised.

“Yeah,” Dylan laughed, “I’m becoming a very important Dutchman!”

“Ha, ha, you will meet the president before I will!” the receptionist laughed, but he also looked worried. When the elevator stopped Dylan went outside to the veranda to listen to his voice mail. The receptionist returned to his desk and made a message on his smartphone. The FBI was in his hotel. Maybe it was time to move on...

Dylan walked outside and sat down in one of the lounge chairs on the veranda. Next to the ever-sleeping Labrador. He dialed his voice mail and listened to the message: “Hi, it’s Umm...I’m calling from the Ocean Shore Restaurant. You know...You’ve called us this afternoon... About a package... I don’t know what it is. I really don’t know what’s inside, but I do know you should get rid of it as soon as possible. People will come after you and they won’t treat you nice... I mean... I think they will kill you if you don’t give them the package... Maybe even if you do give them the package. So, umm... Take

care!” One of the friendliest voices he had ever heard gave him the shivers telling him one of the most terrifying messages he had ever heard.