

# David Baldacci



the forgotten

MACMILLAN

## CHAPTER

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# 1

HE HAD THE LOOK of a man who was afraid that tonight would be his last on earth. And he had good reason to think so. The odds were fifty-fifty that it might be, and the percentage could go higher depending on how the next hour turned out.

The margin of error was that small.

The roar of the twin-engine boat moving at near full throttle wiped away the nighttime quiet on calm ocean waters. At this time of year the Gulf of Mexico was usually not so peaceful. This was typically the most active period of the hurricane season. While several storms were brewing out in the open Atlantic, none as yet had formed a firm center and entered the Gulf. Everyone on the coast was crossing his fingers and praying it would remain that way.

The fiberglass hull cut cleanly through the dense, salty water. The boat could hold about twenty people comfortably, but there were thirty folks on board. They were desperately gripping anything they could to keep from being bounced overboard. Despite the smooth waters, a boat carrying far too many people and moving at high speed was never very stable.

The captain piloting the boat did not care about the comfort of his passengers. His top priority was staying alive. He kept one hand on the wheel and the other on the dual throttles. He eyed the speed gauge with a worried look.

*Come on. Come on. You can do this. You can make it.*

Forty miles per hour. He pushed the throttles ahead and crept the speed stick up to forty-five. He was almost topped out now.

Even with the twin stern-drive engines he wouldn't be able to muster more speed without unduly depleting his fuel. And there were no marinas around here to provide more gas.

Even with the breeze created by the boat's movement it was still hot out here. At least one did not have to worry about mosquitoes, not at this speed and this far from land. The man eyed the passengers one by one. It was not an idle observation. He was counting heads, although he already knew the answer. He had four crewmen with him. They were all armed, all watching the "passengers." In a mutiny it would be five against one. But the passengers did not have submachine guns. One clip could take out every one of them with bullets to spare. And the majority were women and children, because that was where the real demand was.

No, he was not worried about a mutiny. He was worried about timing.

The captain checked his illuminated watch. It would be close. They had been late leaving the last outpost. Then their chart plotter had gone haywire for thirty nerve-racking minutes, sending them in completely the wrong direction. This was vast ocean. Every bit of it looked the same. No landmass to aid in navigation. They were not in well-marked shipping channels. Without their electronic guidepost they would be screwed, like flying a plane without instrumentation in thick fog. The only outcome would be disaster.

But they had gotten the plotter straightened out, corrected course, and he had immediately pushed the stern-drives hard. Then he had pushed them some more. His gaze continued to flit to his dash, checking the oil, fuel, and engine temperature gauges. A breakdown out here would be catastrophic. They couldn't exactly call the Coast Guard for assistance.

He futilely looked to the skies for eyes watching from up there. Unmanned eyes that would send back gigs of digital data about what they were seeing. He would never hear the response team until it was too late. The Coast Guard cutters would be on them before he could do anything. They would board, know immediately what was going on, and he would go to prison for a very long time, perhaps the rest of his life.

But he was not as scared of the Coast Guard as he was of certain other people.

He pushed the boat's speed up to forty-seven and said a silent prayer that a vital engine part would not blow. He looked at his watch again. He counted the minutes in his head as he scanned the water ahead of them.

"They'll feed me to the sharks," he muttered.

Not for the first time, he regretted agreeing to this business venture. Yet the money was so good he could not turn it down, despite the risks. He had done fifteen of these runs and figured with a similar number in the future he could retire to a nice, quiet spot in the Florida Keys and live like a king. It beat the hell out of driving his boat for pasty tourists from the North looking to land a tuna or marlin but more often simply puking all over his boat in rough seas.

*But first I have to get this boat and these people where they need to go.*

He eyed the red and green navigation lights on the bow. They gave a solemn glow to an otherwise moonless night. He counted more minutes in his head at the same time as he scanned the boat's gauges.

His heart sank.

His fuel was running low. The stick was dipping perilously close to reserve status. He felt his gut tighten. They had too much weight. And the problem with the navigation system had cost them over an hour, many nautical miles, and precious fuel. He always added a fuel buffer of ten percent to be sure, but even this surplus might not be enough. He scanned the passengers again. Most were women and teenagers, but some were beefy men, easily over two hundred pounds each. And there was one man who was a true giant. But dumping passengers as a solution to his fuel issue was beyond problematic. He might as well put a gun to his own head and pull the trigger.

He swiftly redid the calculations in his head, just as airline pilots did after getting a full passenger and cargo manifest. It was the same question regardless of whether your ride was in the water or thirty thousand feet above it.

*Do I have enough fuel to get there?*

He caught the eye of one of his men and beckoned him over.

The man listened to his boss's problem and did his own calculations. "It's gonna be tight," he said worriedly.

"And it's not like we can start throwing people overboard," said the captain.

"Right. They have the manifest. They know how many we're carrying. We start throwing them overboard, we might as well jump in too."

"Tell me some shit I don't know," the captain snapped.

He made a decision and eased off the throttles, cutting their speed back to forty miles per hour. The dual props started spinning more slowly. The boat was still fully up on plane. To the naked eye there wasn't a big difference between forty and forty-seven miles per hour on the water, but with the reduced fuel burn it could be the difference between running dry or making it. They would fuel up, and the return trip, with only five of them on board, would be no problem.

"Better to be a little late than not get there at all," said the captain.

There was a hollow ring to his statement and the other man did not miss it. He clenched his weapon tighter. The captain looked away from him, his throat constricting as a cold dread gripped him.

To the people who'd hired him, timing was important. And being late, even by a few minutes, was never a good thing.

Right now the insane profit margin did not really seem worth it. You couldn't spend money if you were dead.

But thirty minutes later, with his engines starting to suck on air instead of fuel, the captain saw his destination straight ahead. It rose out of the ocean like a throne for Neptune.

They were here. They were very late, but at least they'd made it.

He looked at the passengers. They too were staring at the structure, their eyes bugged out. He couldn't blame them. Even though this was not the first such structure they had seen it was still a monstrous sight, especially at night. Hell, it still freaked him out, even after all the similar trips he'd made. He just wanted to dump his load, fuel up, and get his ass back to where he'd come from. As

soon as the twenty-five passengers stepped off his boat they were someone else's problem.

He slowed his engines and took his time docking alongside a floating metal platform tethered to the larger structure. After the ropes were secured, hands reached across and started pulling the passengers onto the platform, which bobbed up and down from the light chop created by the docking process.

He didn't see the larger ship that was normally waiting to take passengers onward. It must have already left with a load.

As the captain signed off on some documents and received his pay in plastic bundles taped down, he looked at the passengers as they were herded up a long metal stairway. They all looked terrified.

*They should be*, he thought. The unknown was not nearly as terrifying as the known. And he understood quite clearly that these people were well aware of what was about to happen to them. And they also knew that no one else cared.

They were not rich.

They were not powerful.

They were truly the forgotten.

And their numbers were growing exponentially as the world was settling swiftly into a permanent state of the rich and thus powerful and then everyone else. And what the rich and powerful wanted, they usually got.

He opened one of the plastic bundles. His mind did not immediately register what he was seeing. When it became apparent that what he was holding was cut-up newspaper and not money, he looked up.

The muzzle of the MP5 was pointed directly at him, less than ten feet away, held by a man standing on Neptune's Seat. The MP was an awesome killing weapon at close quarters. It would prove so tonight.

The captain had time to put up his hand, as though flesh and bone would block shaped ordnance coming at him far faster than a jumbo jet could fly. When it hit him it did so with thousands of foot-pounds of kinetic energy. Twenty such rounds slammed into him at roughly the same time, shredding his body.

The impact of the spray of slugs knocked him off his feet and then over the gunwale. Before he sank beneath the waves the four other men on board joined him in the water. All shredded, all dead, they disappeared into the depths. The sharks would have a buffet tonight.

Punctuality was not only a virtue, it seemed, but also an absolute necessity.

## CHAPTER

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# 2

THE VESSEL WAS IMMEDIATELY drained of its fuel, oil, and other fluids and then scuttled. Oil and gas created a large sheen on the water's surface that could be seen from above by patrolling Coast Guard and DEA planes.

During the day the abandoned oil platform would look, well, abandoned. Not a prisoner in sight. They would all be inside the main structure safely away from view. Shipments of fresh product moved in and out only at night. During the day the operation shut down. The risk of being seen was too great.

There were thousands of shuttered oil platforms in the Gulf awaiting either demolition or else transformation into artificial reefs. Though laws required that the demolition or transformation take place typically within a year of abandonment, the actual time for that to happen could be much longer. And all the while these platforms, large enough to comfortably house hundreds, just sat there well out to sea. They were empty and ripe for exploitation by certain ambitious folks who needed a series of landing sites as they shepherded their precious cargo across broad waters.

As the vessel slowly sank into the deep Gulf, the passengers were herded up steel steps. They had been roped together and spaced a foot apart. The younger ones had a hard time keeping in step with the adults. When they fell, they were immediately jerked back into line and then beaten around the shoulders and arms. Their faces, however, were not touched.

One man, far bigger than the rest, kept his gaze downcast as he marched up the metal steps. He was over six-six and rock-solid,



with broad shoulders and narrow hips, and thighs and calves easily the girth of a professional athlete's. He also possessed the hard, bony musculature and near-gaunt features of a man who had grown up with not enough to eat. He would fetch a good price, but not as high as the girls, for obvious reasons. Everything was based on profit margins, and the girls, particularly the younger ones, had the highest margins of all. And that could be extended over at least ten years. By that time they would have collectively earned millions of dollars for their owners.

By contrast, his life would be relatively short as he was literally worked to death, or so his captors believed. "LMP," or "low-margin product," he would be called. The girls, on the other hand, were simply referred to as "gold."

He seemed to be mumbling to himself, but not in a language that anyone around him could understand. He missed a step and stumbled. Batons immediately rained down on his shoulders and the back of his legs. One struck him in the face, bloodying his nose. They were apparently not worried about *his* looks.

He rose and kept going. And kept mumbling. The blows did not seem to have affected him.

There was a young girl in front of him who glanced back at him once, but he didn't return her gaze. An older woman in line behind him shook her head and said a prayer in her native Spanish and then made the sign of the cross.

The man stumbled again, and again the beating took place. The guards jabbered at him, slapped him with their roughened hands. He took the punishment, rose, and kept going. And kept mumbling.

A shaft of heat lightning to the east illuminated the sky for about a second. Whether or not the man interpreted this event as some divine signal to act was unclear. His actions, however, were crystal clear.

He bulled past one guard, slamming into the man so hard that the guard pitched over the rail and plummeted down more than thirty feet, hitting and bouncing off the steel platform. His neck broke on impact and he lay still.

What was unnoticed was the sharp knife that the mumbling man

had taken from the guard's belt. It was his sole reason for attacking him. As the other gunmen lined up their shots, the man cut through his bindings, grabbed a life jacket hanging on a hook on the stair rail, slipped it on, and dove off on the opposite side from where the guard had gone over.

When he landed he did not hit steel. He slammed into the warm waters of the Gulf.

He broke the surface awkwardly and went under.

Seconds later a barrage of MP5 rounds ripped the surface of the water, creating hundreds of tiny whitecaps. A boat was sent out a few minutes later to look for him. But there was no sign. In the dark, he could have gone in any direction, and it was a lot of surface water to cover. The boat finally returned. The Gulf waters grew calm once more. He was probably dead, they thought.

If not he soon would be.

The remaining prisoners, twenty-four of them now, continued their slow ascent to the cells where they would be kept until another boat came to take them onward. They were placed mostly five to a cage. There they joined other prisoners who were also awaiting rides to the mainland. They were young, older, and in between. They were all foreigners, all poor or otherwise not part of any mainstream society. Some had been targeted and captured. Others had merely been unlucky.

As bad as that luck had been, it would only get worse once they left here.

The guards, mostly foreigners themselves, never made eye contact and did not even acknowledge the existence of their captives, other than when they slid plates of food and jugs of water inside the cages.

The captives were just nameless, meaningless bits of particle temporarily residing in the Gulf of Mexico. They sat on their haunches. Some stared out between the bars of the cages; most kept their gazes on the floor. They were defeated, resigned, unwilling to attempt a fight, or find a path to freedom. They seemed to have stoically accepted their fate.

The older woman who had been behind the large man would

occasionally direct her gaze far down to the ocean's surface. It would have been impossible for her to see anything in the water from the enclosed space. But once or twice she imagined that she had seen something. When the food and water came she ate and drank her small allotted share and pondered the man who had attempted an escape. She silently admired his bravery, even if it had cost him his life. At least he was free, if dead. That was far better than what awaited her.

Yes, maybe he was the lucky one, she thought. She put a bit of bread in her mouth and took a sip of warm water from the plastic jug and forgot all about the man.

A half mile from Neptune's Seat the man swam through the water. He looked back in the direction of the structure, now invisible to him. He had never intended to swim to shore from an oil platform. This was solely improvisation on his part. He had planned to take a plane from Texas to Florida. His current dilemma was the result of carelessness on his part that had resulted in his becoming a victim. But he had to get to land, and swimming there seemed to be the only way.

He adjusted the life jacket—which was too small for him but provided some needed buoyancy—and treaded water for a bit, trying to move as little as possible. Next he turned and started to float on his back. Darkness was when the sharks came out. Eventually, though, he would have to swim. Nighttime was the best time to do that, despite the dangers from the finned predators. Daylight would leave him exposed to many hazards, many of them man-made. Aided by the stars, which provided some needed navigational guidance, he set out in the direction that he believed to be toward land. He would occasionally look back at the platform, trying hard to solidify in his mind its location in the vastness of the Gulf. It was unlikely, he knew, but he might one day have to find it again.

His strokes were compact, seemingly effortless. With the buoyancy of the life jacket he could keep this pace up for hours. And he would have to, to get where he needed to go. He had decided to turn a possible catastrophe into an advantage.

He would head in the same direction another fast boat would have taken him at a later point in time. Perhaps he would beat his fellow captives to the final destination, if the sharks didn't disrupt his plans by shearing off a limb or two and leaving him to bleed out alone.

His strokes became automatic, his breathing the same. This allowed his mind to wander and then focus on what lay ahead. The swim would be long and exhausting and fraught with peril. He could die at many points along the way. But he had survived much to get to this point. He would simply will himself to live.

He had to hope it would be enough.

It usually had been in a life marked more by tragedy and pain than by anything remotely approaching normalcy.

He stoically accepted it as his lot in life.

And he swam on.

## CHAPTER

# 3

THE OLD WOMAN WAS TALL but bent. Her spine had curved itself over the last decade, and that had reduced her height by three inches. Her hair was cut short and in severe lines around her face, which had all the wrinkles and sun damage one would expect after more than eight decades of living, two of them in coastal Florida. She navigated with the aid of a walker, two tennis balls stuck onto the bottoms of the front legs for stability.

Her large hands clutched the top bar of the walker. Over her shoulder was her purse. It was large and bulky and rode awkwardly against her body. Her gait was steady and purposeful. She looked neither right nor left, nor over her shoulder. She was a woman on a mission and the passersby on the street voluntarily moved out of her way. Some smiled at what they no doubt believed was a dotty old woman who no longer cared what anyone thought about her behavior. It was true she no longer cared what others thought. But she was far from dotty.

Her destination was just up ahead.

A mailbox.

She ran her walker right up to it, using a free hand to balance herself against the stout property of the U.S. Postal Service. With her other hand she reached into her purse and pulled out the letter. She paused and looked at the address one last time.

She had spent considerable time writing the letter. The younger generation, with all of its tweets and Facebook and cryptic texts and emails where no actual language or grammar were involved, would never have understood taking the time to compose a handwritten

missive such as this one. But she had wanted to get the words just right, because what she was writing about was so extraordinary. At least to her way of thinking.

The addressee's name was written in block letters to make it as clear as possible. She did not want this piece of mail to go astray.

*General John Puller, Senior (Ret.).*

She was sending it in care of the VA hospital where she knew he was staying. She knew his health was not good, but she also knew that he was a man who could make things happen. He had risen nearly as high in the military as it was possible to go.

And he was also her brother. Her younger brother.

Big sisters were special to their little brothers. While they were growing up he had done his best to make her life miserable, playing an endless series of practical jokes on her, embarrassing her in front of her boyfriends, competing with her for their parents' affections. It was different when they became adults. Then it was like the grown man was desperately trying to make up for all the hardship he had caused his older sister.

She could count on him to sort this out. More to the point, he had a son, her nephew, who was very good at figuring things out. She reckoned this letter would eventually end up in his capable hands. And she hoped he came down here. It had been a long time since she had seen her nephew.

Too long.

She opened the lid of the mailbox and watched the letter slide down the metal gullet. She closed the lid and then opened it twice more just to make sure the letter was in the belly of the box.

She turned her walker around and made her way back to the cabstand. She had a favorite taxi driver who had picked her up from her home and now would drive her back there. She could still drive but chose not to tonight.

The mailbox was situated at the end of a one-way street. It was easier for him to park where he had, leaving her with only a short walk to the mailbox. He had offered to post the letter for her, but she had declined. She needed to do it herself, and she also needed the exercise.

He was a youngster to her, only in his late fifties. He wore an old-fashioned chauffeur's hat, although the rest of his outfit was decidedly more casual: khaki shorts, blue polo shirt, and canvas boat shoes on his feet. His tan was so uniformly dark that it looked like the product of a UV bed or spray-on tan.

"Thank you, Jerry," she said, as she climbed, with his assistance, into the backseat of the Prius. Jerry folded up her walker and put it in the rear of the car before getting into the driver's seat.

"Everything good to go, Ms. Simon?" he asked.

"I hope so," she replied. For the first time she looked and felt truly nervous.

"You want to go back home now?"

"Yes, please. I'm tired."

Jerry turned around in his seat and scrutinized her. "You look pale. Maybe you should go see a doctor. Got enough of them in Florida."

"Maybe I will. But not right now. I just need some rest."

He drove her back to her little community on the beach. They passed a pair of soaring palm trees and a sign set on a brick wall that read, "Sunset by the Sea."

The sign had always irritated her, because she lived by an ocean, not a sea. Technically, she actually lived on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in the Panhandle of Florida. She had always thought that "Sunset Coast" or "Sunset Gulf" sounded better than "Sunset by the Sea." But the name was official and there was no changing it.

Jerry drove her to her house on Orion Street and saw her inside. A typical residence for this part of Florida, it was a two-story structure with cinderblock walls covered in beige stucco with a red terra-cotta roof and a two-car garage. The house had three bedrooms, with hers right off the kitchen. It was thirty-one hundred square feet in an efficient footprint, far larger than she needed, but she had no interest in moving. This would be her last home. She had known that for a long time.

She had a palm tree out front and some grass and decorative rocks in the yard. In the back a privacy fence ran along the property line, and she had a small reflecting pool along with a bench

and a table where she could sit, drink her coffee, and enjoy both the cooler mornings and the final rays of the evening light. On either side of her house was another house pretty much exactly the same. All of Sunset by the Sea was pretty much the same, as though the builder had some large machine to spit the houses out off-site to later be transported and erected here.

The beach was behind her house, just a short drive or long walk to the sugar-white sand of the Emerald Coast.

It was summer and the temperature was in the low seventies at nearly six in the evening. That was about twenty degrees cooler than the high for the day, which was about average for Paradise, Florida, at this time of the year.

Paradise, she thought. A silly, conceited name, but she also couldn't say it didn't fit. It was beautiful here most of the time.

She would take heat over cold any day. That's why they had invented Florida, she assumed. And perhaps Paradise in particular.

And why the snowbirds flocked here every winter.

She sat in her living room and gazed around at the memories of a lifetime. On the walls and shelves were photos of friends and family. Her gaze rested longest on a picture of her husband, Lloyd, a natural-born salesman. She had fallen in love with him after World War II. He had sold her a bill of goods, too, she supposed. He always claimed to be more successful than he was. He was a good salesman but a bigger spendthrift, she had found. But he was funny, made her laugh, didn't have a violent bone in his body, never drank to excess, and he loved her. He never cheated on her, though with his job and the traveling involved, he certainly had had chances to wander from his marriage vows.

Yes, she missed her Lloyd. After he'd passed away, she'd discovered he had a sizable life insurance policy he'd kept in force. She'd taken the whole of it and bought two stocks. Apple and Amazon. This had been way back. The two A's on her report card, she liked to call them. The investment return had been enough to allow her to pay off the mortgage on this house and live very comfortably on far more money than Social Security alone would have allowed her.

She had a light supper and some iced tea. Her appetite wasn't



nearly what it once was. Then she watched some TV, falling asleep in front of the screen. When she awoke she felt disoriented. Shaking her head to clear it, she decided it was time to go to bed. She rose with the aid of her walker and headed toward her bedroom. She would sleep for a few hours and then get back up, start her day over again. That was her life now.

She noticed a shadow of movement behind her, but had no chance to feel alarmed about it.

That was to be Betsy Puller Simon's last memory.

A shadow behind her.

A few minutes later there was a splash from the backyard.

## CHAPTER

# 4

THE TIMING WAS AS good as it would ever get. He performed a few more strokes in the water until he finally felt the earth beneath his feet.

He had lucked out and been picked up by a small fishing boat about two hours after his escape from the platform. The men had asked no questions. They gave him some food and water. They told him their location, and by reversing that course he got a better fix on the platform out in the Gulf. He could not forget all the prisoners housed there. They would be gone before he would ever return there. But there would be others to replace them.

The fishing boat could not take him all the way to shore, they told him, but they would get him close enough. They chugged along slowly for what seemed a long time and he helped them with their work as part repayment for their helping him. They could not make a beeline for his destination. They were out here to work, and work they would.

His great strength was marveled at by the fishermen, and they seemed sorry to see him go.

They pointed in the direction of land when they got to the place where he needed to get off. They gave him a better-fitted life jacket and he slipped over the side of the boat and started swimming toward land.

As he turned back he saw one of the men make the sign of the cross over his chest. Then his sole focus became reaching something he could stand on.

By the time he arrived on shore his muscles were tight, knotted,

and he was once more dehydrated. Water had been all around him for such a long time and yet he had not been able to drink even a drop of it. Fish had nipped at him. Singly that was not a problem. Cumulatively, his legs and arms were covered in tiny cuts and welts. And his head and shoulders hurt from the beating he'd taken from the guards and from his plunge off the platform. He could feel the bruises and cuts on his face from these impacts.

But he was alive.

And on land.

Finally.

The darkness covered his high-stepping through the last few breakers until he reached the sugar-white sand of the Emerald Coast in Florida's Panhandle. He looked right and left up the beach for any late-night beachcombers. Seeing none, he dropped to his knees, rolled onto his back, and drew in long deep breaths as he stared at a sky so clear there seemed to be no space between the billions of visible stars. Paradise was a small town with long beaches, but its downtown area was built right along the sand. The central business district was farther down and to the west. And luckily it was so late that there was no one out on the boardwalk that ran parallel to the beach where he was.

He thanked God for allowing him to live. So many hours of swimming, and then being picked up by the boat. In the vastness of the Gulf, what were the odds of that without divine intervention? The sharks had also miraculously left him alone. He had to attribute that to his prayers as well.

His captors had not come after him.

Prayer again.

Thankfully, the beach was deserted.

Well, not quite.

God must have missed that one.

He hunkered down in the sand as he heard the people coming.

Then he flattened himself to the beach and burrowed in, allowing his over six-foot-six-inch, 290-pound frame to blend into the white grit that people from around the world came to lie on during the course of a year.

It was two people. He could tell by the different voices.

One man. One woman.

He lifted his head a bare inch and stared in their direction. They were not walking a dog. Prayer, again. A dog would have found his scent by now.

He would not act unless they spotted him. And even then, they might just assume he was simply lying on the beach enjoying the evening. He hoped they would not see him, and that if they did they would not panic. He knew that after his long journey at sea he must look pretty bad.

He tensed his body, waited for them to pass by.

They were within forty feet of him. The woman looked in his direction. The moonlight was not strong, but not weak either.

He heard her exclaim and then say something to her companion.

But then he realized that she was not actually looking in his direction.

As he watched, a lithe figure came out from behind the cover of sand dunes.

There was one pop and the man fell. The woman turned to run, but there was another pop and she fell too, hitting the compacted sand with a thud.

The figure put the gun away, gripped the woman's hands, and dragged her into the water a good ten feet. The tide took over from there and the body quickly sank beneath the water and was swept out.

This same process was repeated on the man.

The figure stood on the sand a few inches from the water and scanned the breakers, probably making sure the bodies were not going to be swept back to shore. Then the figure turned and was gone the way it had come.

He kept his body flat to the stretch of beach even as he felt shame for not coming to the couple's assistance. But it had happened so quickly that he doubted he could have prevented their deaths.

And sometimes God was busy with other things. This he knew to be true. God had often been busy when he had needed him. But then many people needed God. He was just one of billions who asked for divine assistance from time to time.

He waited until he was certain the shooter was gone. He had no idea why the couple had been killed. He had no idea who had killed them. It was not any of his business.

He could not remain on the beach now. He made his way to the boardwalk, and spotted a bicycle chained to a post. He ripped the post out of the ground, freeing the chain. He wound the chain around the frame, climbed onto the bike, and set off.

He had the city's streets mostly memorized. He had a place to go, to stay, where he could change his clothes, rest, eat, hydrate, and then he could begin his quest, the real reason he had come here.

As he disappeared into the night, he began to mumble again, to pray for forgiveness for not helping the couple by killing their attacker. He was good at killing, perhaps the best. But that did not mean that he liked it, because he did not.

He was a giant, but actually a gentle man.

But even gentle giants could be moved to violence for the right reasons.

He had such reasons.

He had them in abundance.

He was no longer going to be gentle. Not while he was here.

It was the sole thing driving him. Indeed, it was the only thing really keeping him alive.

He rode on as the two corpses were pulled slowly out to sea.