



Final Betrayal

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Prologue: Monday Night

Second muzzle flash. Quick snap and burn in his abdomen – no more than a bee sting, really – and, bah-de-bing, Stephen Forsster conceded the situation had headed south faster than the Dow Jones on Black Monday; but he never for an instant considered he might actually die.

Two minutes before, he'd been settled against the driver's door, wedged between the steering wheel and seat-back, right knee cocked across the soft curve of the leather console. His big black Mercedes lounged on a bluff high above the Pacific Ocean. Milky stretch of beach fanned out far below. Moonlight surfed the troughs and peaks of frothy waves. Breakers crashed on sand and drowned the buzz of traffic on the Coast Highway that snaked the hilltop a hundred yards above.

"Come on, ace," Stephen cajoled in the direction of the shadowed profile. "You already raked in your dividends. Now that it's my turn to do a little profit-taking, you're soiling your Depends like some Joe-lite who yanks his buck-fifty out of the market every time the NASDAQ drops six points."

His agitated companion flicked him a quick glare, shoved open the car door and lunged out, retreating down the gravel path, pale trench coat flapping.

Fishy-smelling salt air whistled through the sun roof, feathering Stephen's hair. He sighed and reclined his head against the car window, disgustedly reaffirming his belief that "people" were the one investment that invariably paid a lousy return.

In the bright moonlight, a flash of khaki crossed his peripheral vision; a face appeared above the open sunroof.

"Ahhh ... a change of heart? Or did you come back to suck my dick?" Stephen asked with a slow-growing smirk. He lifted the end of his tie and flopped it over his shoulder.

"Suck this, asshole." A pale sleeve blurred upward and a gun barrel reflected moonglow.

"Hey!" Stephen jerked forward, banging his ribs on the steering wheel, palms outstretched protectively.

The blast punched his chest and cut off his words. Stink of cordite filled the car.

He slowly dropped his chin. Studied the dark flecks that speckled his monogrammed cuffs... the inky stain that crawled across pale blue Egyptian cotton. He slow-motion pressed his hand against the fabric. Warm blood tickled and webbed the backs of his fingers.

Stephen looked up to the fingertip hooked around the trigger – anticipated another blast; but the world downshifted to freeze-frame while his mind hurtled forward like an out-of-synch movie where the actor's words are heard before his lips have formed them.

Confusion creased his brow. He wanted to say, "This was a very expensive shirt."

The muzzle flashed again.

Bee sting. No actual pain, but... perhaps it was time to send out a mayday?

He closed his eyes and forced his mind to calm. He couldn't be dying. He didn't hurt anywhere and there weren't any tunnels of bright white light luring him to the "other side." Wasn't that the way it was supposed to happen? Here in California, at least? A wry grin tugged his lips.

He opened his eyes. The gun and the khaki coat were gone.

Thank God. Now he'd be all right. He was too hot – too *cool*, to die. Another twitch at the corners of his mouth. Yeah, man, the world needed him... and he just needed to wait. Give that gun-toting maniac time to reach the highway. Then he could safely book on home.

Mellow out, he silently instructed as he hummed a few bars of "The Real Slim Shady" and reconfirmed his future existence with a mental rundown of tomorrow's calendar. His investment firm was IPO'ing a hot bio-tech company in the morning – had to be at the office before the opening bell. And that new blonde receptionist in the law office downstairs. She was on his calendar for a late lunch. He planned to fuck her after the market closed.

He smiled weakly. Yeah, he would come out of this just fine. Just like he always did.

But man, was he whacked. His eyes gazed upward, dazzled by the silvery moonbeams that stretched to embrace him. He focused his attention on that foxy little receptionist, certain a fantasy would give him a lift.

She always wore those form-fitting sweaters that emphasized her young, firm breasts. He pondered the size and tint of her nipples, wondered how they would taste, tried to imagine them rigid against the fur of his chest. Expected to feel the image stir his ever-primed penis. Was surprised that it didn't. Instead, he felt heavy. Lethargic. Like when he'd sat weighted down in those steaming Calistoga mud baths Lili used to drag him to when they were first married.

Vague movement caught his attention. Something thumped his brow. The back of his head smacked the window and he tasted warm, coppery blood.

OK. That's it. Time to go. Get home before the kids go to bed. He wanted to ask Jared about his soccer tryout... hear Stephie play that new piece on her cello. Mozart? He thought it was.

He tried to reach for the key in the ignition. Too tired. Bummer. Wished he had some blow. Give him the jolt he needed. But he didn't do drugs anymore. Not for two years. No uppers in the console – not even a cigarette. He'd given up most of his vices for Lili.

Uh-oh. Lili. She had some fundraiser thing tonight and he'd promised to be home for dinner with the kids.

He tried to check his watch, but his arm hung limp. Disconnected.

Now he was getting worried. He started to call for help, but then hesitated. What if he really was badly hurt? What if he had to go to the hospital? Lili would find that stuff in his briefcase. Shit. That would be the end. She would leave him – would take their children... and fifty percent of his net worth. Panic burbled. He couldn't let that happen.

He couldn't let Lili find out about those other women. She'd never understand they were just... a hobby. Especially since some of them were her friends. And that sex therapist. The one Lili insisted he see. Oh, yeah, he saw her, alright. Wrote a check to her every week, but instead of curing him of his all-consuming fixation, she'd spent the last three sessions sucking his balls while he spanked her bare ass with a metal ruler because she was a bad girl.

The irony made him chuckle. But Lili wouldn't see the humor.
His thoughts began to slow. Like the pulse that thumped in his ears.
Have to get home. Pretend nothing happened. Don't upset the kids.
He stared up at the full moon. It smiled. Like Lili when she was happy. It moved against him...
leaned to caress him... kissed his lips with Lili's warm, soft mouth. He sighed. Closed his eyes.
Contented.
It would be alright. Lili would forgive him.