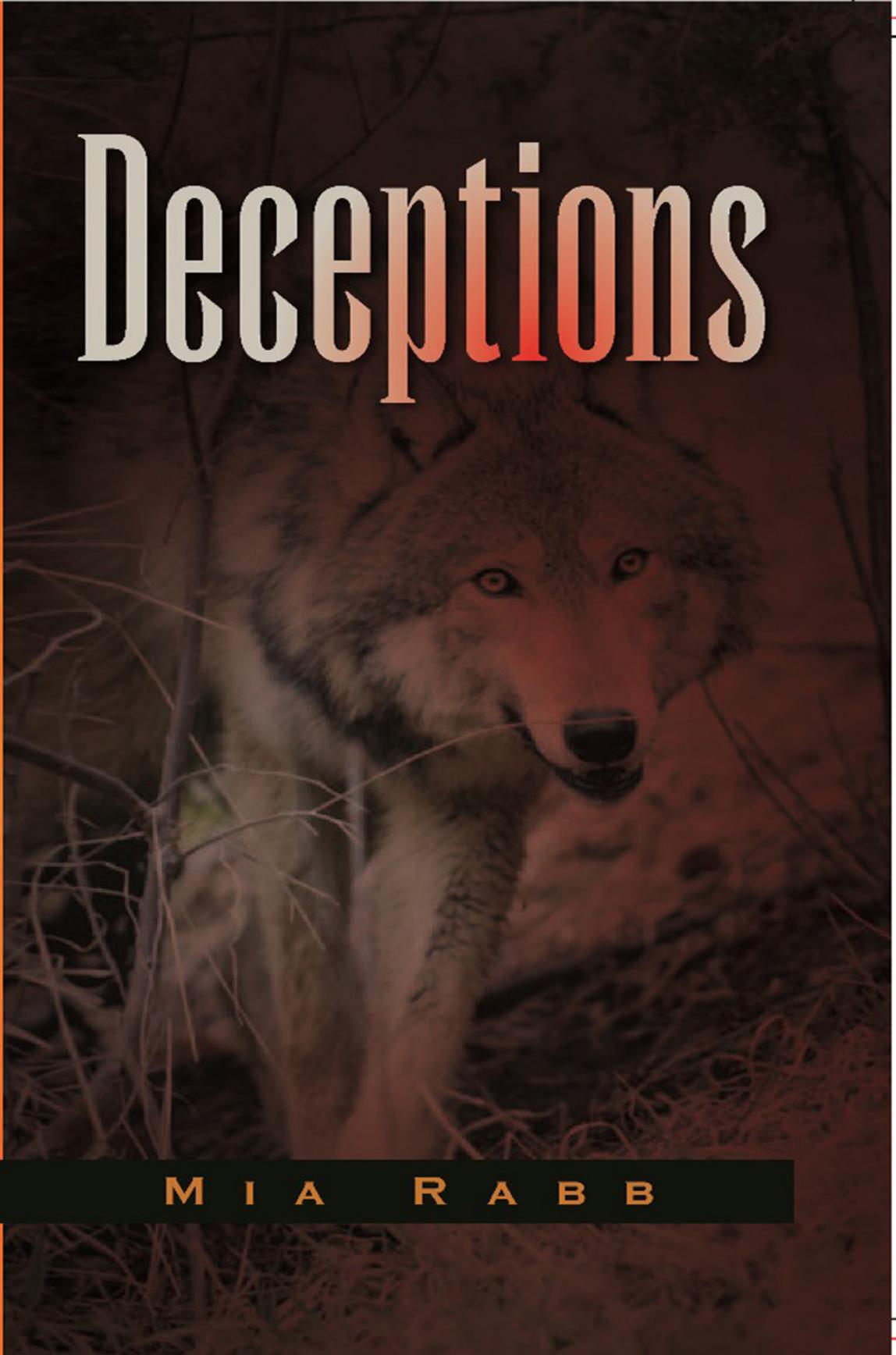


Deceptions

A photograph of a wolf in a dark, wooded setting. The wolf is the central focus, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. Its fur is a mix of grey, brown, and white. The background is filled with dark, bare tree branches, creating a sense of mystery and danger. The overall lighting is low, with a warm, reddish-brown tint, particularly around the wolf's face.

M I A R A B B

DECEPTIONS

DECEPTIONS

MIA RABB

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To my friend Kathy who gave me courage and enabled me to write this book.

CHAPTER 1

The Secret Terror

It was another late night at armed services advocate general (ASAG) headquarters. Robert Cass, a cocky, overconfident lawyer for the navy leisurely strolled into his office. It was Lt. Alan Richards first day back after losing his leg in Iraq. He was in a sullen, grumpy mood. Cass had tried his best to cheer his friend up, but Alan was not in the mood for cheering up. And to top it off, the admiral had assigned Alan and Rob the task of defending a lieutenant who was accused of rape.

As Rob pulled into his parking space at his apartment, he leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment. What a day. He took the service elevator up to his apartment. He had an uneasy feeling as the door opened up. One of the lightbulbs was burned out in the hallway, and he had been meaning to put another one in. As he stepped off the elevator, the hair on the back of his neck stood up. A hand grabbed his arm and pulled him off the elevator. A hard punch to the abdomen winded the commander as he bent over in pain. He dropped his briefcase and threw a punch to his attacker. Just then another punch hit Rob in the left flank area before he was hit on the side of the head and fell to the ground. As the blackness from the last punch started to invade his brain, he did everything to try to maintain consciousness. He tried to get a look at the three attackers, but they wore masks over their faces. "You put up a pretty good fight, sailor. We don't like it when you defend scum like Durmor," said one of the attackers.

"You are taking out your anger on the wrong person. If you stop now, it will be simple assault," said Rob.

"Shut up, your fancy lawyer talk won't work on us." They stuffed a putrid rag in Rob's mouth, and he almost threw up at the smell and taste of it. They handcuffed Commander Cass and pulled him over to the water pipe and attached the cuffs so he was face down. Then Vuskic pulled Cass's hair and snapped his head back. Cass thought at first Vuskic was going to break his neck. Then suddenly, Vuskic slammed Cass's head down on to the floor. "We're going to teach you a

lesson so you never defend scum like that again. The boys and I are real good,” said Vuskic in a very menacing voice that made Rob cringe. They pulled at his clothes, and two of the attackers held his legs down. Rob’s mind screamed at the brutal assault that was about to take place. He closed his eyes tightly and his mind to the assault and placed himself in his Stearman with his hands on the steering wheel. It was a bright and sunny day with the wind blowing through his hair, he imagined.

As each one of the attackers took their time with Rob, they each kicked him in the chest as they were done. “You continue to defend that scum, and we’ll be back,” threatened one of the attackers. His attackers were Lt. Mark Lott, a friend of Cass’s; he didn’t speak during the attack for fear that Rob would recognize his voice. He also worked in the same office building as Cass, so he knew that he would be late that night. Lt. Mitchell Vuskic was the leader of the foursome, did not like lawyers, and had it in for anyone he thought deserved a beating. He also didn’t like women and had raped several in the past, just not identified yet. Sgt. Michael Jacobs was Vuskic’s right-hand man, followed Vuskic wherever he went, and did what Vuskic told him. The fourth man was videotaping the attack.

Rob just sat there, shaken at what just happened. He pulled his legs up to his chest and pulled his crumpled clothes toward him. It must have been hours before he finally got up and picked up his briefcase; he fumbled with his keys to unlock his apartment door. Once inside, he locked the door behind him and took out his service revolver—just in case they came back. The lawyer in him said he should call the police. This was felony assault, but the man in him said no, then everyone would know what happened to him—pictures, exams, finger-pointing, and whispers. He could not endure that, the humiliation. He did not call the police. He turned on the shower as hot as he could stand it and just stood in the shower with all of his clothes on. It was hours later that he realized the water had turned cold, and he was sitting in the shower all hunched up. “This didn’t happen; this didn’t happen,” he kept saying to himself. He felt the bile swell up in the back of his throat and the urge to vomit at the thought of the rag in his mouth and the assault that took place.

He was due in court the next morning and called the admiral and told him he had fallen down a flight of stairs and that he was calling from Mercy’s emergency room and would not be in today. Alan could handle the case. With the threat of his attackers coming back if he defended Durmor, Rob was actually a little scared. He had been in scuffles before, but never something like this. He still had his revolver out and was skittish at any noise. Rob was engrossed in thinking of what had happened to him and did not hear the knock at the door. Mikhail,

his brother, had called work to talk with him and found out he had called in sick. He had a key and let himself in after Rob didn't answer the door. Rob saw a movement out of the corner of his eye and was off the couch in a moment, pointing the gun at his brother. Mikhail's eyes were as big as saucers as his brother pointed the gun at him. "I knocked," said Mikhail. "I have a key and let myself in. You seem a little nervous, my brother," observed Mikhail. "I called work, and you were not there. I got worried and wanted to check on you. What happened, brother?" asked Mikhail.

"I just fell down some stairs," stated Rob.

"Why do you point a gun at me?" asked Mikhail.

"There have been some muggings in the area," said Rob vaguely as he looked away so Mikhail could not see his eyes. Mikhail eyed his brother suspiciously; he was hiding something!

The next day Rob went to work and met with Admiral AJ Zueleger, a tall man with white hair and glasses. He was a strict by the book military man. Rob apologized for missing a day. "Commander, that was some fall you took. Are you sure you are okay?" asked the admiral.

"I'm fine, just some bumps and bruises," said Rob, not looking directly at the admiral. He could not look the admiral in the eye when he spoke to him; the admiral might be able to see into him and know what really happened. Just then Lieutenant Richards and Colonel MacArdle (Mac, Rob's nickname for her) entered the admiral's office. "Wow, Commander, that is some eye," stated Richards. Rob's right eye was badly bruised, and he had a bruise on his forehead when Vuskic slammed his head to the floor. At least they didn't know of the other bruises. Mac looked at Rob and wanted to go over to him and comfort him. She couldn't do that in front of the admiral or Lieutenant Richards. "Are you okay, Commander?" asked Mac. "I'm okay," he replied but still could not make eye contact. This behavior did not go unnoticed from the admiral. The admiral asked Richards to bring him and Commander Cass up to speed where he was with the Durmor case. As Alan was giving the details of the case, Rob felt his head start to buzz and the bile at the back of his throat. He bolted out of the admiral's office and made it to the nearest men's room just in time to vomit what he had eaten for breakfast. The admiral had followed Commander Cass to the men's room. As Rob splashed cold water on his face, the admiral noticed the bruises and abrasions around his wrists. Once again he asked him if he was okay. Rob assured him he was; it was just some old yogurt that he ate for breakfast that was not agreeing with him, he tried to convince the admiral. "Join me when you can, Commander," and the admiral left. Rob felt drained. He freshened up and went

back to the admiral's office. How could he tell his CO what really happened? He decided he better at least tell him the assault happened because of the Durmor case. "Admiral, I wasn't exactly forthcoming when I told you I fell down the stairs," said Commander Cass sheepishly.

"Go on," said the admiral.

"Someone who does not want me to represent Durmor in this case beat me up outside my apartment. They said they would be back to finish the job unless I stop defending 'scum' like Durmor," said the commander. By now he was trembling and was trying to hide that from the admiral. He did not want the admiral to know anything else about what happened, but how long could he keep it to himself? He was having flashbacks during the day, and especially at night, it was worse. "I'd like a copy of the police report, Commander," said the admiral.

"Uh, I didn't have one filled out, sir," said Cass, now visibly getting uncomfortable before the admiral.

"Let me get this straight, Commander. You were beaten up by a couple of thugs because of this case, and you didn't have a police report filed," said the admiral, livid at his top lawyer. "Why on earth didn't you get the police involved, Commander?" The admiral glared.

"Uh, I thought I could handle it on my own," said Cass.

"Commander, you are now off this case. I do not want a mistrial because you are somehow directly involved in this case." By now, Rob had a visible line of sweat on his brow and was starting to feel the nausea again. He fidgeted before the admiral. "I sure hope you know what you are doing, Commander," said the admiral. "Dismissed!" Rob quickly exited the admiral's office and went to his office and closed the door. What was he going to do? He was visibly shaking now after his encounter with the admiral. He swallowed hard and fought back the nausea. He was off this case; that should make his attackers happy, he thought.

"Finney," yelled the admiral, "get me Richards and MacArdle." The two of them showed up, and the admiral briefed them on what had happened to Commander Cass. He was officially off the case. "Lieutenant, if you feel you need someone else to help you with this case, I'll assign Commander Tingley to assist you."

"That would be fine," stated Richards. Once Commander Tingley was present, the admiral then suggested that Cass be a witness since he was assaulted for defending Durmor. The three were dismissed from the admiral's office and went about their business.

It was the end of the day, and Cass went home exhausted. He really didn't do anything today but felt drained. As he got off the elevator to his apartment, his heart began to race; he broke out in a sweat. "What happens if they're back?"

He took a deep breath and was relieved when he heard his neighbor's voice in the hallway. He quickly entered his apartment and locked the door behind him.

That night he tossed and turned with fitful bouts of sleep. The assault played through his mind as he slept. "The boys and I are real good. Teach you a lesson," and then he heard the sound of a zipper. "We'll be back." All this played through his mind as he slept. He woke up, drenched in sweat, his heart pounding and his head throbbing. He looked terrible. He had dark circles under his eyes; stress lines were evident on his forehead. He took a shower and headed to work.

By now, it was Friday; Rob was looking forward to the weekend and just relaxing and trying to get the past events out of his mind. The admiral had called Cass, Richards, MacArdle, and Tingley into his office for a meeting. "Lieutenant, bring us up to speed where we are with the Durmor case." Lieutenant Richards proceeded to explain where they were with the case. The admiral noted the discomfort with Cass. Tingley and MacArdle chimed in to give their update also. "Commander Cass, what are your thoughts on the case?" asked Richards. "You're doing a fine job, Lieutenant," stated Cass. As the three of them continued to fill in the admiral, Cass was getting uneasy, starting to sweat; he could feel his heart start to race. *Just take a deep breath*, he reassured himself quietly. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't hear the admiral at first. "Commander," the admiral said. Cass almost jumped out of his skin when the admiral spoke to him. Of course, all of this didn't go unnoticed from the admiral. "I think you should testify in this case since the three thugs who obviously want you off the case beat you up. You are directly involved in this case and are a witness to maybe who is going around beating up and raping women." Cass looked at the admiral terrified. "I can't testify, sir," said Cass almost in a panic.

"Why the hell not, Commander?" drilled the admiral. "Answer me, Commander." By now, Cass's head was swirling; he felt the bile at the back of his throat and fought to swallow it. He was shaking and sweating profusely. He bolted out of the admiral's office once again to the nearest men's room. It dawned on the admiral what had happened to Cass and why he was acting the way he did. AJ had seen this before, a long time ago. He dismissed the bunch from his office and followed Cass into the men's room. He ordered Gunny to stand outside of the men's room and not let anyone come in there while he was with Cass. The admiral was in the men's room alone with Cass; he heard Cass quietly sob while he was still in the stall. "Commander, are you okay?" asked the admiral.

"I'm fine, sir," Cass said weakly.

"Like hell you are," said AJ with genuine concern. By now Cass was out of the stall and splashing cold water on his face. "Really, Admiral, I'm okay."

“No, you’re not, Commander. You weren’t only beaten up; you were also sexually assaulted, weren’t you?” stated the admiral. “Look at all the bruises on your body, your wrists.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Admiral,” said Cass, trying to keep it all together.

“Commander, look at me.” Cass’s eyes welled up with tears as he looked at the admiral. He couldn’t keep it in much longer. “Rob, talk to me,” said the admiral. Rob tried to talk but was so overwhelmed he couldn’t catch his breath. The admiral placed a hand on his shoulder. “Just take your time, catch your breath.” Cass started to weep as he told the admiral what had happened. “Admiral, I should have been able to fend off these attackers. I’m six foot five and am trained in hand-to-hand combat. I don’t know what happened. I can’t testify,” he said as he started to hyperventilate again. “It’s not your fault,” said the admiral. “Let’s go back to my office where we can talk some more.” Cass washed his face again and regained his composure then went out alongside of the admiral, looking down at the floor so no one could see his face. “Finney,” the admiral growled, “I do not want to be disturbed, no matter what, no exceptions.” With that, he and Cass went into the office. AJ motioned for Cass to sit down in the chair. “Commander, I know someone who can help you. You need to talk about this.”

“I don’t know, sir.” AJ hurriedly called his friend Paul Wainwright, a well-known psychiatrist in the DC area. “Rob, don’t worry about testifying. You’ll be off the witness list, plus as of now, you are on a leave of absence.” Rob sat in the admiral’s office feeling depressed and humiliated. His secret was out, now known by his CO. Whom would he tell, and what would the consequences be? As AJ told Paul about Commander Cass, Cass could only feel more and more despondent. “We’ll be there within the hour,” AJ told Paul. The admiral, noticing now how despondent Cass was, told him that this secret was confidential; and there was no one else that ever needs to know this. His secret was safe with the admiral. “Finney,” the admiral yelled, “I’ll be out of the office until 3:00 p.m. Cancel my appointments until then.” With that, the admiral and Cass left for Paul’s office.

Paul Wainwright was fourteen years old when his father, a well-known lawyer in DC, was killed in a horrific car accident on the freeway. AJ and Paul were neighbors and what most people would say had a best friend relationship. It was about nine months after Paul’s father was killed that his mother, a social worker at Mercy Hospital, remarried Karl Rost, an up-and-coming senator in DC. Everyone was shocked that she remarried so soon after Patrick’s death, especially Paul who missed his father dearly.

It started a few months after they were married. Ruth would work the p.m. shift at Mercy, and Karl would take out his sexual frustrations on Paul. It started with just fondling and then progressed to intercourse. Paul fought back and tried to get away from Karl many times. Karl would intimidate Paul with the threat of killing him or his mother. And no one would believe Paul; they would say he was making up the story to gain attention after his father died. So Paul gave in to the assaults. After months of being assaulted, AJ, who was also fourteen at the time, noticed a change in his friend. He had asked Paul several times what was going on, and Paul would always say nothing. One night after a brutal assault, Paul went over to AJ's house to shoot some hoops. AJ noticed his friend was depressed. This was not like Paul at all. After much pressuring from AJ, Paul finally told him what was going on. "We have to tell my dad," said AJ. Of course Paul, fearing retribution from Karl, begged his friend not to tell anyone. AJ persuaded his friend to see the error of his ways. After Anthony Zueleger had heard what was going on, he said, "We have to notify the police, Paul." Paul started to sob. "We can't, Mr. Zueleger. He will kill my mom and me, and he said no one would believe me because everyone would think I was looking for attention after my father died."

"Is that what you are doing, Paul?" asked Anthony. AJ was appalled that his father, an attorney, would ask such a question. "No, sir, I am not," yelled Paul. "Mr. Zueleger, one thing my father taught me is if you want to prosecute someone, you better have proof or evidence that a crime was committed. Right now it is my word against his. I've taken showers and have washed all the evidence away. They won't find any evidence that Karl Rost has assaulted me," said Paul, now proud that he could state something that his father had drilled in him many times. "Mr. Zueleger, I know I am a minor, and you have to report this, but can we wait a little while? I would like to see a counselor first. I tried telling my mom about it, but she dismissed it, saying Karl would never do anything like that. I also need parental consent. My mom will never allow it, and Karl will probably hurt me if I ask him to sign the paper."

"Don't worry, son. I know of someone who can help you, and I'll sign the papers. You just let me know when you are ready to go to the police." Anthony referred him to Phillip Greene, a psychiatrist who specializes in sexual assault. Paul met with Dr. Greene several times, and it would be a month later that he would ask for Anthony's and Dr. Greene's help in going to the police. Paul knew by doing so, he would end up destroying his family. What he proposed to do, unbeknownst to the law, was let Karl assault him one last time and then leave the house, and he would have all the evidence he needed. Anthony and Phillip

reluctantly went along with Paul's idea. And it happened just as Paul had stated it would. Karl was especially brutal with him that night and assaulted him several times. After it was done, Paul lay on his bed, knowing how the events of tonight would change his life forever.

Karl Rost was convicted of felony child abuse, felony sexual assault of a child, and sentenced to sixty-five years in Leavenworth. Paul's mother, Ruth, was sentenced to five years prison time for failing to protect a child from harm and felony child abuse. The life as Paul knew it was over. He moved in with the Zuelegers. Before all of this happened, Paul wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. His father was a lawyer for the navy, his mother a social worker for the navy. After meeting Phillip Greene, Paul now had a direction in his life and knew what he wanted to be in adult life. Both Paul and AJ went to the naval academy, Paul specializing in psychiatry and AJ in law.

AJ and Rob entered Paul's office; it was a secluded office off Bethesda Naval Hospital. All patients' identities were concealed and kept confidential. Names were changed so no one could identify a patient at Paul's clinic. Paul shook hands with AJ and Rob and had both men take a seat. He made Rob feel at ease and asked if he wanted Admiral Zueleger to stay in the room if it made him feel safer. Rob looked over at the admiral and asked if it was okay if he spoke with Paul alone. The admiral sat in the waiting room for the next two and a half hours as Paul spoke with Commander Cass. Cass was still despondent over what had happened to him and that he felt he was not man enough to handle it by himself. He felt like a failure inside. Paul admitted him to the ward and promised the commander he would help him through this. A nurse took Cass to his room. There were cameras in every room so patients could be monitored. You never know what a patient might do in the heat of the moment. Paul and AJ exchanged conversations, and Paul assured AJ that Cass was safe and that he could help him. The underlying despondency worried Paul though, and he made AJ aware of his feeling.

AJ was back at the office at 3:00 p.m. Before he had his thoughts together, Lieutenant Richards, Commander Tingley, and Colonel MacArdle were asking to see the admiral. "Enter," the admiral's voiced boomed as the three entered his office. "At ease," he said. All three started to talk at the same time. Colonel MacArdle, having the highest rank among the three, asked the admiral how Commander Cass was. Of course he said he was okay. MacArdle then proceeded to start to talk about Commander Cass testifying. Before she knew it, the admiral was in her face, growling, "Cass in now off limits. He is officially off of your witness list and will not be testifying." The colonel started to protest, along with Richards and Tingley, "But, sir, if Commander Cass has testimony that will help

in this case—”The admiral cut Lieutenant Richards off by snapping at the three of them. “That is an order. He will not be on your witness list. And if any of you disobey this order, I will have your rank and have your butt out the door faster than you will know it. Is that understood?” he growled at his employees. Just then AJ’s cell phone rang. It was Paul on the other end. “AJ, it’s Paul. Commander Cass tried to kill himself this afternoon.” AJ stood there in stunned silence, horror pouring over his face. “He tried to hang himself at the back of a door with a sheet, but we caught him before he could put his action in to play. AJ, he’s safe and sedated right now. Why don’t you stop over after work tonight and we’ll talk.” MacArdle noted the worried look on the admiral’s face and dared to ask if everything was okay. The other two noticed the worried look, but after enduring the admiral’s wrath, they were not about to tempt their fate and ask any more questions. The admiral said everything was okay and left it at that. “Dismissed,” he said to the officers, and they about-faced and left the room. All three of them knew something was wrong, and it involved Commander Cass.

AJ went and saw Paul and observed Cass peacefully sleeping. It was probably the best night sleep he had had since the attack. Paul and AJ talked for a few hours about Cass, the attack, and just catching up on things over the years. “I’m really glad you brought him here, AJ,” Paul said. “He’s a mess, but I can help him.”

Paul Wainwright was well known throughout the country as the leading expert in sexual assault. He would hold workshops once a month for anyone who was interested; he would go into grade, middle, and high schools and colleges and talk about sexual assault. It was amazing how many people came to see him. He was always there to help anyone who needed it. His mentor Phillip Greene was still in the DC area but had since retired. He and Paul would do lunch once a month just for old times’ sake. It had been two weeks since AJ took Cass to see Dr. Wainwright. He was making excellent progress. Paul would meet with Rob two to three times a day, then he would be in group sessions for the majority of the rest of the day. He was still inpatient and would remain so until Dr. Wainwright deemed him safe to go back to his apartment or work. Paul figured it would be another week or two yet. Rob was coming to terms with what had happened to him. The case against Lieutenant Durmor was done; he was found guilty and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison. AJ was glad this case was done. It seemed to take a toll on his employees.

Lieutenant Lott, who still was involved with Vuskic and Jacobs, had a hard time dealing with what he had done to his friend Robert Cass. If Cass ever found out he was involved, there would not be any forgiveness, and Cass would prosecute his friend to the fullest extent of the law. Lott knew what he must do.

He had the original videotape of the attack and had made a copy of it. Besides Cass's attack, there was an assault of women also on the tape. The guys always made tapes of their attacks so they could watch them over and over again and laugh at how scared their victims were and brag about how "good" they were. It made Lott sick just to think about how he had stooped so low to be accepted by his new friends. He sat down and wrote a letter:

Dear Admiral Zueleger:

Enclosed you will find an original and the only copy of an attack on Cmdr. Robert Cass and others. I am really sorry for the pain and suffering I have put my friend through. I know Commander Cass will never be able to forgive me. I have betrayed his trust. I was involved in the attack and sexual assault of Commander Cass as were Lt. Mitchell Vuskic and Sgt. Michael Jacobs. Lieutenant Durmor was the one who was videotaping the attack. This was not a random attack; it was planned. I knew Commander Cass was on the Durmor case and was working late Monday night. In my apartment are several more tapes of assaults/rapes by the above-mentioned people. Please forgive me. I will turn myself in Monday morning.

*Sincerely,
Lt. Mark Lott, USN*

He then went to the guard station at ASAG headquarters and dropped the package off for Admiral Zueleger, making sure that it was marked confidential and that it was for the admiral's eyes only.

He knew this was a written confession and would be used against him. If his buddies ever found out what he did, they would probably kill him. He breathed a deep sigh as he left the guard station. His career in the navy was finished, and he would probably spend the rest of his life in Leavenworth and regretting what he did to Cass. Maybe it would help if he got together with his buddies and went out and got drunk to forget about what he had done.

He met up with Vuskic and Jacobs at one of the local bars. Both men noticed that their friend was down in the dumps, ordered him up another beer, and asked what was wrong. They knew if they got him drunk enough, he would tell them what was wrong. And that was exactly what they did. Once the alcohol kicked in, Lott started to cry and told Vuskic and Jacobs what he had done. They were livid. How could he betray them, after all they did for him, taking him under their

wings? Vuskic decided it was time to leave. On the way out to the car, he pulled a gun and shot Lott in the head two times. They left the body in the parking lot and left. Jacobs was glad he was dead because Lott had too much of a conscience. Both men on an adrenaline high followed a woman home and forced her into her apartment. She screamed. Thank god one of the neighbors heard her scream and called the police. Vuskic and Jacobs raped the woman and were walking to their car when the police showed up. There was an exchange of gunfire, and Vuskic and Jacobs lay dead on the ground.

Admiral Zueleger opened the package that was marked for him. Disbelief overtook him as he read the note. He had on the navy news in his office when the names of the deceased came over the news. All three were dead. "Good lord," said AJ as he put it all together. He put a tape in the VCR and watched in horror the rape of a woman and then the assault and rape of Commander Cass. What would he do now that he had this evidence? He called Paul and arranged for an emergency meeting. He tucked the tapes and note in his briefcase and left.

He met with Paul and had him read the letter and look at the tape. AJ asked, "What should we do with these?"

"Give them to Commander Cass," Paul said.

"Are you joking?" AJ asked, astonished at his friend's calmness over the whole matter.

"This will give Cass the closure he so desperately needs. He has no idea that Lott and the rest of his attackers are dead, let alone that Durmor was involved and was convicted," explained Paul. "AJ, you might see a side of Commander Cass that you have never seen before. Rage, uncontrollable rage. Don't say anything, don't interfere. Just let him get it out. Let him destroy the letter and tapes if he wants to." Paul then had Rob come into the room. "It's nice to see you again, Admiral," said Cass.

"Likewise," AJ said.

Paul said, "I have some things to tell you about." He motioned for Cass to sit down. "Rob, I have a written confession and videotapes of your attack. They are yours to do with what you please. Lieutenant Durmor was the person who was videotaping the attack, the person you at first were going to defend." Rob never realized there was a fourth person involved. Horror came over Cass's face; he turned pale. Paul gave him the letter to read. AJ just sat there and watched Cass's reaction. Tears welled up in Cass's eyes as he found out his friend Mark Lott was involved and now dead. "Is this really true, sir?" He directed his question to the admiral. "I'm afraid it is." Rob was visibly shaken. "Can I see the videotape?" he asked Paul. Paul gestured for him to come over to the other end of the room

where he could have some privacy. "Take all the time you need, Commander." Rob inserted the tape into the VCR and watched in horror the assault of a woman. The tape stopped, and then another image appeared. It was the assault of him. He watched in silent horror for a few seconds, his mind racing. He didn't realize it, but he was starting to hyperventilate. It really was true. Rage consumed him, and he forgot about Paul and AJ being in the room. He took the tape out of the VCR and threw it on the floor. He pulled some of the tape out and tried to rip it apart. He stomped on it, smashed it with his fists until his fists were bloody, yelling at the bastards who had done this to him. This went on for five minutes, all the while, while AJ and Paul watched him and let him vent. Cass started to cry, and he continued to hit the small pieces of what was left of the tape. He ripped apart the letter. He was exhausted, emotionally, mentally. It was over, finally, but then would it ever be over? His secret was safe, evidence of what happened to him destroyed in minutes by rage. Paul was right; AJ had never seen this side of the commander before. Cass was oblivious to when Admiral Zueleger left. Paul had gestured for him to leave so he could help Cass, counsel him in his emotions and rage.

It would be another week before Paul would let Cass out of the ward and give him some independence. Cass would return to his apartment but only if Paul would accompany him. Every time he got off the elevator to go to his apartment, he would see the place where the assault took place. His heart would race, and he would break out into a sweat. This was normal, Paul told him; and as time went by, these feelings of fight or flight would get better. Cass enrolled himself in a refresher course on hand-to-hand combat. He started running again. It seemed as if he was getting some semblance back in his life. It was another Friday, and Paul had discharged him. There was a certain amount of anxiety on Cass's part, but he took a deep breath and left the security he had known for the last four weeks. He would meet Paul yet on a weekly basis and gradually lessen the frequency in the times he would see him. Cass called the admiral and asked if he could come back to work on Monday. He just wanted to get back to a normal life. The weekend went off without a hitch. Every day seemed to get a little better with dealing with what had happened to him.

It was Monday morning. Rob's heart was racing. It had been four weeks since he had been in uniform and back at work. How would he handle all the questions of where he was? He decided to go in early and talk with the admiral. The admiral put Rob's fears at ease. "No matter what," the admiral said, "you hold your head up high. There is nothing to be ashamed about, and if it ever comes out what happened to you, you don't have to explain anything. Yes, there

may be questions today, but you don't have to give any explanations. Be yourself." Rob felt a lot better after talking with the admiral. He had a whole new sense of respect for this man. If it hadn't been for him, Cass didn't know where he would be today. He was glad that he wasn't able to complete his suicide attempt and that it would never be known that he was in counseling. If it were found out, he would surely be grounded from flying the F-14s, one of his passions. But now he didn't have to worry about that, he was cleared, and that was one huge worry off of his mind.

By now it was 8:00 a.m.; and Lieutenant Richards, Colonel MacArdle, and the rest of ASAG staffers were coming into work. Richards and MacArdle went to the admiral's office, surprised to see Commander Cass back and in uniform. "Welcome back, Commander," they both chimed in together.

"Thank you, it's good to be back." There were no remnants of the attack left on Rob's face, the bruises were gone, and he seemed rested and like the old Rob. The admiral smiled at Cass as all exited his office. They now had an untold understanding that was just between the two of them. He could handle anything that came his way today. It was good to be alive, and it was good to be among friends again. He thought he would go see Mark Lott's parents and give his condolences to them for the loss of their son, his friend. He didn't blame Mark; he forgave him.

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