

DEADLY ECHOES



PROLOGUE

The Zodiac maneuvered quietly in the darkness, riding the mild swells of the Pacific Ocean. The sky was moonless, a perfect night for killing. The man in charge watched the *Kaiyo Maru #7* through binoculars. The garish lights from the fishing vessel lit up the ocean, illuminating the screeching, circling ocean birds that wheeled above the carnage. The six-person team was dressed in black, each carrying an assortment of weapons. They motored confidently toward the larger ship, the stench of dead fish stronger as they drew near. The sound of the powerful winch hauling the ship's catch helped mask the Zodiac's approach. The leader focused his binoculars on the fisherman tending the long-line. The main cable ran for miles with monofilament line tied to a razor-sharp hook at one-hundred-foot intervals.

He watched with growing revulsion as each hook was stripped of its prize. The line had been set to run shallow, which also allowed for the indiscriminate catch of diving birds and sea turtles, their lifeless carcasses tossed back into the ocean. But most of the hooks held the fishermen's target catch: sharks. They ranged from four to seven feet in length. Each shark was hauled aboard where every fin was expertly sliced off. Spewing blood, the shark was then thrown back into the water, still alive. The sharks could no longer swim so they sank. The lucky ones would quickly bleed to death, or drown, since sharks need to stay in constant forward motion for water to flow over their gills. Others would linger for days as they died of starvation. He'd seen footage of the butchery before, they

all had, but to see it firsthand was like touching a match to the dry tinder of his outrage.

Using hand signals, he instructed his man to bring the Zodiac around, careful not to create a telltale wake. They motored in a slow arc until they were directly in the path of the *Kaiyo Maru #7* then waited. As the one-hundred-sixty-foot vessel drew close, they matched the Zodiac to the speed of the ship and using rubberized grappling hooks, looped lines over the forward section of the hull. Once secured, five members of the team quietly boarded the ship leaving one man behind with the Zodiac.

Two of them hurried through a watertight hatch and disappeared into the superstructure; their job was to go below decks, secure the engine room, and then round up the crew below. Guns at the ready, the leader, flanked on either side by the remaining two members of his team, moved undetected toward the bridge. The captain was alone at the helm, leaning over a chart. At the popping sound of gunshots coming from below, he turned his attention to the instruments, as if searching for a mechanical reason for the unexpected noises. The three intruders burst through the hatch, guns raised. The man on the left spoke Japanese and ordered the captain to put his hands on his head. He emphasized his words by jamming the barrel of his machine gun into the soft skin under the captain's chin. The captain immediately complied.

The leader gestured for the prisoner to step away from the controls. He knew that the fishermen would be no match for his skilled team. One by one, the reports from below confirmed that the crew had been rounded up and that the captured sailors were secured at gunpoint on the main deck. The leader glanced at his watch. Less than fifteen minutes after boarding, the ship and crew were his.

The leader pulled off his ski mask and ran his hand through his longish gray hair. He was tall, over six feet, but alarmingly thin. He may have been handsome once, but deep scarring marred his face and neck. It looked as if the skin around his eyes had been melted, and when he blinked, it appeared to take a great deal of effort. The person on his right followed suit, and the mask slipped

off, revealing perfect olive skin accented by short spiky black hair. The woman was more striking than beautiful, green eyes radiated both self-assurance and intelligence. She was five foot seven, muscular like an athlete, yet slender. She smiled in a subtle way that implied that she was in control of her surroundings, confident that no matter the conflict, victory would be hers.

"Ask them how many in his crew." The leader ordered his translator, who had elected to keep his mask on.

A flurry of Japanese was initiated by the man who still held his gun to the captain's chin. The captain grunted a reply, his eyes wide with fear.

"He says there are twenty-one men plus himself."

The leader raised the walkie-talkie to his mouth. "How many prisoners do you have?"

"We've got nineteen on deck. Two were killed and left below."

"That's everyone. Start filming. Make the crew finish reeling in the line, only be sure to release each fish. Pay particular attention to anything that comes up dead. Get it all."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to his translator. "Take the captain down on deck. We'll be there in a minute."

Once the bridge was theirs, he set down his machine gun and began to punch buttons on the navigation unit. It took him several minutes, but he finally programmed the autopilot to guide the ship on the course he'd chosen. After he double-checked the plot, he adjusted the ship's speed and then made a discreet radio call to his own vessel to come and retrieve the team. The one-hundred-sixty-foot megayacht *Triton* was standing by just out of radar range and would be alongside in less than thirty minutes.

"How long will it take them to find this boat once we leave?" the woman asked.

"I set their speed for ten knots. Left undisturbed, they should arrive near land in a little over two days. We'll be long gone before anything we've done is discovered."

The walkie-talkie sprang to life, and his men down on the main

deck reported that the last of the long line had been reeled in and all the fish released.

"We're on our way down," the leader replied, pulling his mask back over his head and carefully adjusting the material until the slits fit perfectly around his damaged eyes.

The woman replaced her mask then removed a small handheld video camera from her rucksack.

They both hurried down the gangway to the killing floor of the fishing vessel. The leader knelt down and picked up one of the knives the fishermen had been using to fin the sharks. It was a simple knife with an unremarkable wooden handle, but it would do the job. He glanced at the woman, she nodded and began recording. Two of his men grabbed the captain, the third man held an automatic weapon on the frightened crew. With a man on each side, the captain's arms were stretched away from his body. Despite his violent struggles, the leader used the knife to cut away the captain's shirt until the man was naked from the waist up. An expression of horror mixed with disbelief contorted his face. He began to moan and shake his head back and forth as they pulled a plastic wrap snug around his ankles.

This night had been twenty years in the making, and though it only represented the beginning, the leader knew he was about to taste the sweetness of revenge. He made a show of testing the sharpness of the blade on his thumb and then smiled as he moved toward the sobbing fisherman. As the knife parted flesh, he ignored the screams and felt an upwelling of elation. Everything was now set in motion.



CHAPTER ONE

At the sound of his phone, Donovan Nash was instantly awake. The caller ID told him the number was restricted and that it was 3:42 in the morning. He braced himself; nothing good ever came of a call at this hour. “Donovan Nash.”

“Donovan Nash,” a strained, raspy voice repeated. “I was hoping to speak to Robert Huntington.”

Donovan sat up in bed. *Robert Huntington* was a name he hadn’t used in over twenty years. A name only a handful of people knew—the man on the phone wasn’t one of them. “Who is this?”

“All you need to understand is that I know who and what you are. This is your wake-up call to let you know I’m going to destroy everything that’s important to you.”

“Don’t threaten me.” Donovan threw off his covers and launched himself out of bed, adrenaline pumping. He opened the drawer to the bedside table and grabbed his gun, went to the bedroom window, and peered at the street and driveway below. He saw no vehicles outside. Everything looked normal.

“Think of it as less of a threat and more of a promise. I can also assure you it will be a slow and painful destruction. Go to YouTube and find: *shark payback*. I’ll be in touch, Robert.”

Donovan could hear the deathly silence as the call ended. *I’m going to destroy everything that’s important to you*. The words replayed over and over in his head, and he appreciated the weight of the pistol in his hand.

He threw on pants and a sweatshirt but not before his eyes shot to the ugly scar that ran across his right thigh and the matching

one on his right wrist. All products of a murderer armed with a knife. It had been seven months since he'd been attacked. The physical wounds of that night had mostly healed, but the scars were a constant reminder of what could happen if he let his guard down. With the pistol in hand, he slipped downstairs.

The house was nearly silent, only the soft hum from the refrigerator reached his ears. He thought of his wife and young daughter and for once was happy they weren't here. Seven months ago Lauren had packed up Abigail and moved to Europe to get away from him. He'd tried to spin it any number of ways, but in the end it always came back to the simple truth. Lauren didn't want to be with him—in fact she needed to be on another continent to feel comfortable. He missed his daughter terribly. They spoke often, and video-chatted nearly every day. He was thankful that his absence hadn't seemed to dampen Abigail's enthusiasm for life. He knew Lauren still loved him, but she didn't want to live with him, nor did she want to be entirely without him. They were at an impasse, and he'd reached a sort of uneasy peace with the situation.

Donovan double-checked the alarm system and then went into the study, closed the drapes, and sat down at the computer. It didn't take long to find the *shark payback* video. He clicked on the play icon and noted that it had already been viewed one hundred eighty-three times. He could tell at once this was an amateur video shot at night on a ship. The handheld image jumped and swayed, but the subject was unmistakable. Men wearing masks were pulling in a long line, except they were releasing the fish impaled on each hook instead of keeping them. Occasionally a dead turtle or ocean bird was hauled in and tossed onto the deck where it was closely photographed. A man dressed in black, holding a machine gun walked into view, and it was then Donovan understood. Someone had boarded a fishing vessel and stopped the fishing. The camera did a long, slow shot of the bloodstained deck, the plastic tubs filled with severed shark fins. Next, a container of fish that were still alive, gills opening and closing, straining, bodies flopping help-

lessly. Donovan knew this was what the industry called by-catch, fish that were cut into pieces to bait the thousands of hooks.

The homemade video panned upward and then zoomed in and focused on a lone fisherman. Shirtless, he was held so that his arms were outstretched, his ankles bound together. Moaning, and clearly terrified, he struggled in vain to get free. A single man came into the field of view and with little fanfare raised his knife and then the picture went black, but the audio recorded screams of agony. A simple web address flashed on the screen. Donovan quickly typed it into his browser and started the separate video. Without the constraints of YouTube, every horrific detail filled the screen.

Donovan watched as the fisherman's detached arms were thrown into a plastic tub with the shark fins, and still alive and screaming, he was tossed overboard. The camera followed the doomed fisherman as he tried desperately to remain afloat but slowly sank from view. Still trained on the ocean, a Zodiac flashed past the camera. Shocked, Donovan instantly backed up the image and then froze the playback. Painted on the side of the rigid inflatable boat was the unmistakable gold logo and blue letters of Eco-Watch, the scientific research organization that Donovan had founded ten years ago.

Donovan let the video play to the end, to a message in bold print that nearly forty million sharks are killed each year to feed Asia's market for shark fin soup. The view counter showed that over two thousand people had watched already. Donovan jumped back to YouTube and glanced at the early postings. The first two were riddled with poor grammar and typos; they congratulated Eco-Watch on killing the bastards. Then there were four more that labeled Eco-Watch a band of assassins and called for the arrest and immediate execution of every member of Eco-Watch responsible.

The shrill sound from the telephone on the desk startled him. It was a secure line installed by the Defense Intelligence Agency. Before she'd left, Lauren had worked part time for the DIA. She'd graduated with a Ph.D. from MIT in Earth Science and had gone

to work for the government. In all the months since she'd left, that phone hadn't rung once.

"Donovan Nash."

"Donovan, it's William. Sorry to wake you, but we need to talk."

William VanGelder had raised him since he was fourteen years old. William had made a fortune in the oil business with Donovan's late father, and in turn had amassed a vast fortune in both money and power since then. Nearing seventy-five years of age, William showed no signs of slowing down. He was still an active member of Washington's political elite, a behind-the-scenes power broker with a long-held position within the State Department as an ambassador at large.

"You didn't wake me," Donovan replied. "Why are you calling on this phone?"

"We have a problem and we need to make some decisions."

"I'm listening."

"I just got a phone call from a nearly hysterical Beverly Stratton."

"Wait. John's wife?"

"Yes. She'd just been informed that her husband's yacht had run aground in Hawaii. All aboard had been murdered, including John."

"Oh, no." Donovan felt all the air leave his body. John Stratton had been one of William's closest friends, and by default, one of Donovan's. John and William had gone to Harvard Law together. John had built a conglomerate of companies through a successful career as a venture capitalist. Always a major supporter of environmental groups, including Eco-Watch, John's kindness and enthusiasm had a great deal to do with turning Eco-Watch into one of the premier privately funded scientific organizations in the world. Donovan owed the savvy venture capitalist a great deal. John's megayacht, christened *Triton*, was his passion, and he and his crew were experienced and cautious seaman. Nothing about this made any sense.

"We don't know much, but Beverly gave me a heads-up on one development. It's the reason I called on the secure line." William stopped as if collecting himself for a moment. "There's a closed-circuit camera system on his boat, you know how John loved his gadgets. The Coast Guard played back the last images stored on the hard drive and found that whoever boarded the *Triton* were welcomed with open arms because they arrived in an Eco-Watch Zodiac."

"Did they get a good look at them?"

"Not really. The FBI is investigating, but the security system was disabled shortly afterward."

"I got a phone call this morning too," Donovan said. "It's why I was already up. Someone, a man I didn't recognize, called and asked for Robert Huntington. He told me he knew who I was and that he was going to destroy everything that was important to me."

"Do you think it's connected to what happened to John?"

"Absolutely. Go to YouTube and search for *shark payback*. You'll see what I mean. After you do that, pack a bag and get to the Eco-Watch hangar. We're going to Hawaii. What island did John's ship run aground?"

"Kauai."

"Okay, we'll fly to Lihue Airport. Do we need to swing by John Wayne Airport and pick up Beverly?"

"She told me she was making arrangements to use one of her husband's company aircraft."

"If that's the case, then she'll get there before we do." Donovan felt the adrenaline rush of starting things in motion. "I'll make all the arrangements. Let's try and be wheels up no later than zero six thirty."

"I'll see you at the hangar."

Donovan hung up, snatched his pistol, and hurried into the kitchen to make coffee, taking care to close all of the drapes and curtains in the house. Before the phone call this morning only seven people in the world knew that Robert Huntington was still alive. It was a secret that had remained hidden from the public for

over twenty years, and Donovan would go to almost any length to make sure it remained that way. Failure would result in the wholesale destruction of everything he'd built. Eco-Watch might survive at this point, but it would have to go on without him. There were treasured friendships he'd forged under false pretenses that would immediately alter and more than likely end badly. It was a lie he owned, and it, in turn, owned him. Everything he held dear was dependent on the perpetuation of the lie. Exposed, he became Robert Huntington, one of the most despised men in the world. He poured a cup of coffee and speed-dialed his assistant, Peggy, on his cell phone.

"Peggy. It's Donovan. Sorry for the early hour, but there's an emergency."

"I'm awake," she said in a sleep-filled voice that didn't match her words. "What can I do?"

"John Stratton has been murdered. I need the *da Vinci* readied for a trip to Kauai." Donovan had named all of Eco-Watch's aircraft after famous men in the history of science. "Call Michael and Buck, I want to be wheels up by zero six thirty."

"That's awful news. I always liked John." Peggy sounded genuinely upset. "I'll make the calls and get everything moving."

"There's also a YouTube video called *shark payback* you need to watch. Once you do, pull the file for the public relations firm we have on retainer as well as our attorneys. This could get ugly in a hurry."

"Got it," Peggy replied, now fully awake. "I'll see you at the hangar."

He topped off his coffee, snatched the pistol, and hurried back to the study. He refreshed the *shark payback* web page and saw that there were now 4,317 hits. He scrolled forward until the Eco-Watch Zodiac came into view. He froze the image and stared. John was dead, which combined with the phone call, meant that whoever was after him knew a great deal about Eco-Watch and had already killed John Stratton, which meant everyone in his world was at

risk. Lauren was in France with their daughter. A similar situation seven months ago had driven her off in the first place, and he had to warn her now. It was nine thirty in the morning there. He picked up his phone and dialed, and as it rang, he looked at the pistol he'd carefully laid on the desk and wondered if the day would ever come where he didn't feel the need to be armed.



CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Lauren McKenna recognized the number on her phone and frowned. She was on the balcony having a quiet morning tea with Stephanie VanGelder, a dear friend visiting from London. Lauren's daughter, Abigail, was at the park with the nanny and Henri, her head of security. She and Stephanie were in the process of planning their day.

Stephanie reacted to Lauren's expression. "Who's calling?"

"It's Donovan calling from a secure phone. This can't be good."

Stephanie looked at her watch and frowned. "It's four thirty in the morning there."

Lauren, too, had done the math. She braced herself and put the phone to her ear. "Hello."

"Hey, it's me," Donovan said.

"I'm here with Stephanie." Lauren didn't want to have a prolonged conversation in front of Stephanie. As the niece of William VanGelder, Stephanie had known Donovan since he was a boy. She knew the truth about all of the secrets, making her one of the few people that Lauren could confide in totally. Over the years the two women had grown into close friends, and Stephanie had supported her decision to leave Donovan. Deep down, Lauren understood Stephanie loved them both, but if she had to choose, she'd pick Donovan.

"Stephanie's there?"

"She came in from London for a few days. Can I call you later?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but we might have a problem. This involves her too," Donovan said. "Some unknown person called

me this morning and referred to me as Robert Huntington. He said he knew the truth and was going to destroy everything important to me. It's not a bluff, it's already started."

"What do you mean?" Lauren felt the first tingle of impending danger gnaw at her nerves.

"Do you remember John and Beverly Stratton? They're old friends of William. They live in Laguna Beach."

"I remember the Strattons. They were at our wedding." Lauren saw Stephanie nod that she knew them. "Stephanie remembers them as well. What's happened?"

"John's boat ran aground in Hawaii. He and his crew were found murdered."

"That's terrible. How is that even possible? Was his wife with him?"

"No. She's in California. Security tape showed the killers boarded John's yacht by using an Eco-Watch Zodiac. The guy that called this morning with the threat told me about a YouTube video entitled *shark payback*. I'll warn you, it's gruesome, and it, too, involves an Eco-Watch Zodiac."

"So you think we're in some kind of danger?"

"We have no idea who these people are, but they've already killed. I think we're all at risk, Stephanie included, and we should act accordingly."

"I already have around-the-clock security, so I think we're safe for the time being."

"I understand. But I needed to pass along the information, to be on the safe side. Please, just be alert."

"We'll be careful."

"Tell Stephanie hello and be sure and tell Abigail I called. I'll keep you posted."

Lauren severed the connection and set the phone down. She noticed that her hands were shaking and folded them in her lap.

"Start from the beginning," Stephanie demanded. "There was more to that call than John Stratton being murdered."

"Let's go inside," Lauren said, gathering up the tray and car-

rying it inside the luxurious apartment. Located near the center of Paris, the flat had been her refuge since she'd left Donovan. The residence was courtesy of Aaron Keller, a senior official at Mossad, Israel's equivalent to the United States Central Intelligence Agency. The security protection was payment for Lauren's unofficial help in finding and stopping a terrorist who was deemed a major threat to both Israel and the United States. The group behind the attempted attack was eliminated, but Mossad wasn't 100 percent certain that the threat to Lauren had died with those men. At times Lauren hated the presence of bodyguards, but now it seemed even more necessary than ever.

"What's happened?" Stephanie asked.

"First, we need to get to a computer and watch a video," Lauren said "Then I'll tell you everything I know."

Lauren led Stephanie to the spacious master suite where Lauren's laptop was set up on a desk. Both women huddled close as Lauren's fingers flew over her keyboard to bring up YouTube. They stood in silence as the video began. When the link to the other website was established, they both flinched at the graphic images and then watched the appearance of the Eco-Watch Zodiac. When it was over, the scientist in Lauren replayed the video while Stephanie turned away.

"That was awful, how can you watch it again?" Stephanie said.

"Scientific observation is rarely accomplished by looking at something once." Lauren sat and watched the video three more times before she leaned in and froze one of the images. She opened the search engine, and brought up a page of various images of actual Eco-Watch Zodiacs. She arranged them on the screen next to the Zodiac in the shark video. "Like this."

Stephanie turned to look at the screen. "What am I looking for?"

"Look at the outboard motors," Lauren said. "Donovan likes Mercury Marine. Every Zodiac in the Eco-Watch fleet is equipped with twin Mercury outboards. Now, I don't know Mercury from

any other outboard, but the motors in these two pictures look different."

"You're right. They're not the same. The Eco-Watch engine is taller and thinner. The other one is counterfeit. But we knew that already."

"We did," Lauren refreshed the YouTube page. "But the 245,852 people who've watched this video have no idea. They think Eco-Watch did this."

Lauren clicked away from YouTube. "I need to forward this information to Peggy at Eco-Watch. It's something the lawyers and the public relations people need to see."

"What about the other things Donovan told you?" Stephanie asked then looked around the room. "You don't think the apartment is bugged, do you? We can talk about anything, right?"

"We're good. Officially, I'm still an analyst for the Defense Intelligence Agency so my friends at the CIA drop by and sweep the place regularly."

"The CIA? You're a meteorological analyst for the DIA—you predict weather."

"From time to time I do a little more than that," Lauren replied. "Anyway, this morning a man Donovan didn't recognize called and asked for Robert Huntington. He said he knew who Donovan was and that he was going to destroy everything that was important to him. Then the caller told him where to find the YouTube video."

"And John Stratton's death is a part of this?"

"The killers used an Eco-Watch Zodiac to gain access to John's yacht. They waited until the yacht had been found to post the video and call Donovan. Everything's got to be connected."

"Their first mistake was warning him they were coming for him," Stephanie said. "We both know how he is right now. He's going after these people, right?"

Lauren nodded. "When does all of this stop? I want things to even out, so he and I can maybe find some firmer ground. Death threats and bodyguards is no way to live."

"Maybe this is exactly what he needs in terms of finding some focus."

"What do you mean?" Lauren was taken aback. Stephanie wasn't usually so direct. Her upbringing was such that she defaulted to diplomacy and tact, like her uncle.

"I'm saying that Donovan has been more than a little lost since you left. He recovered from his physical injuries, but emotionally he was pretty messed up before you left, and he's not any better now—how could he be?"

"He seems better," Lauren said, but she knew the words sounded hollow.

"It's okay. I'm not trying to make you feel bad. We both know that Donovan eventually does something with his turmoil and anger. He channels it into something useful. I mean, look at everything he's accomplished in his life. After his parents died, he made Huntington Oil into a global force from what had been a regional family-owned company. Then he lost Meredith and fell apart. From that despair sprang the idea of faking his own death, changing his entire life, including his appearance, and then using his fortune to help others. He built Eco-Watch into a first-class nonprofit scientific research foundation, one of the best in the world. That's what he needs right now—to feel that need for focus, for action. Once he does, things usually start happening."

Lauren admired the passion Stephanie had displayed, and loved her for it, even though she remained skeptical of her husband's ability to deal with even more stress. "I know he's done those things. He's one of the most capable men I've ever met. That's the problem. He does *things* instead of dealing with *issues*. It's why we're not together. He hides from his past, from everything really, including me."

"I understand why you feel the way you do, and I'm not choosing sides. You know I love you both. I've been around Donovan since he was a kid, seen what he's been through, and at times I've wondered how he can function at all. Let him do what he does, but please, whatever you do, don't give up on him—it would be the

worst thing possible. He's about to get back into a game he does better than anyone, and it's going to do wonders for his state of mind. He'll fix this. All I ask is for you to hang in there until this is over."

"I hope you're right, but I'm afraid for him. He doesn't need this right now. We both know that when he's threatened, he's reckless. If something happens to him, then all of our waiting and trying to figure out who we are to each other is gone—lost forever."