

# A FELONY OF BIRDS

by

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COVER DESIGN

Avrom Tobias

*For my wife, Ellen, the source of my inspiration.*



Part one

# A COMPANY OF PARROTS



Physical violence always made him feel better. He wiped the blood off his fists with the kid's tee shirt and then tossed the broken body in the trunk along with the bag of clothes. He sat and waited for his heart rate to return to normal. Yes, he was definitely feeling better. The beating had purged his system of two negative emotions—jealousy and hate. The young man in the trunk had the misfortune to incite both at once.

The kid's first mistake was to catch Marta's eye. Not that that was particularly difficult to do. Marta's lust for young boys seemed inexhaustible, and it was a full-time job to keep those boys properly intimidated. It was bad enough that Marta liked to tease him with her flirtations, but to find the two of them together like that, in the kitchen, Marta's skirt hiked up to her chin and that Mexican kid's pants down around his ankles. It made him want to open the trunk and pound the broken body a few more times. And that was just the jealousy part.

The hate part came from his irrational loathing of foreigners. He just hated them. Always had. He knew the word for his condition— xenophobia—a fear of foreigners. Not that he feared them, exactly. There wasn't much a man of his size feared. He moved to Wisconsin to get away from foreigners, but that was impossible, they were everywhere. Orientals, their slanty eyes made his skin crawl, and Mexicans, they were like roaches; breeding in dark corners. They made him crazy. His ailment wasn't anything a good shrink couldn't cure, but he actually enjoyed his own remedy.

The big man drove to a desolate spot on Route 7 and dumped the lifeless body in the tall grass. Then he heaved the bag of clothes as far into the bushes as he could. The boy carried no identification; indeed, as an illegal alien, he had no identity, no family, and no home. No one was going to come looking for him, or even know that he was missing. Just another hitchhiker struck by a drunk driver and left to rot. Nameless road kill, he thought to himself as he climbed back into his car.

## CHAPTER 1

Flashing lights ran gaudy streaks of color across the wet road. Three police cars, an ambulance, and a crime scene van lined both sides of Route 7, their blue and red strobes in stark contrast to the gray November sky. A jogger found the body and called it in. Oconee police chief, Bill O'Halleran, was the first cop on the scene. Bill scoped out the body and made a few notes. A Mexican kid about eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a tee shirt and torn jeans. His pockets held a few coins, a dirty cotton handkerchief, and a handful of sunflower seeds.

There was little Chief O'Halleran or his three-man department could do in a case like this but secure the scene and call in the state police. That was the protocol for dealing with serious crimes or mangled roadside bodies. Call the state police and let the pros take over. The pros in this case being Bill's long time friend and mentor, Detective Ben Greer.

Greer looked down at the body and called to the crime scene tech, "How long you figure he's been lying there, Don?" Don, zipping up the body bag, called back, "No more'n a day. Rigor's just settin' in. M.E.can give you a more accurate fix."

The body was in the ambulance before Greer noticed Bill. Oconee was part of Greer's territory, after all, and while not pushing Bill aside exactly, he made it clear that he was in charge and whatever observations Bill had were as near to worthless as the sunflower seeds in the kid's pocket. Bill hung around hoping he

might learn something, but Ben Greer wasn't the nurturing kind.

"Kid's got no ID. Multiple bruises and broken bones. Massive trauma. Looks like a hit and run to me what's your take, Bill?"

"I thought that the guy might have been dumped there, Ben."

Greer shook his head in pity. "Keep the case simple, O'Halleran. How many times have you heard me say that?"

"Yeah, but Ben, there are no skid marks, no broken glass, and the kid's wearing a tee shirt in November for Christ's sake. Doesn't that look a little odd?"

Greer pointed to the wet pavement. "Wet road, no skid marks."

"It wasn't wet yeaterday," Bill muttered. But he was talking to a wall of official indifference. Greer went about his business and wrote up the case as "John Doe/ hit and run/ 11-05." 11-05 being the date the body was found. And that was that. Bill heard no more about it and the soothing familiarity of policing a small town almost removed all traces of doubt from his mind.

Rhoda Deerwalker tapped nervously on Terry Winter's door. She was about to get her first solo assignment, and she felt a little nervous. When she heard his gruff "Come in," she smoothed her uniform, hitched up her belt, and entered.

Rhoda was a little old to be a rookie cop, but her path through the agency was an unconventional one. At thirty-two, the dark-haired, dark-eyed Native American had turned her love for animals and lost causes into a career as a biologist with the US Fish & Wildlife Service. She joined the Service right after college. A full-blooded Chippewa, she breezed through school on one Bureau of Indian Affairs scholarship after another. She felt comfortable in the white man's world. Life on the reservation seemed far away. Only her classic Indian features betrayed any hint of her unconventional past. But like all minorities, the larger world never



let her forget who she was and where she was from.

She was initially assigned to the agency's forensic lab in Alexandria, Virginia, where she spent six years tagging specimens and identifying invasive species. The lab work, while intellectually challenging seemed devoid of meaning. She wanted something more hands-on, something in the field, dealing with the real world. She lived comfortably, had a nice apartment, but it wasn't enough to make her love the city. The woods of Northern Wisconsin were in her blood and the crowded confines of the big city left her unfulfilled. She needed to be outside, and so, after six long years, her repeated requests for a transfer were finally granted.

The agency sent her back to Wisconsin and re-trained her as an investigator. She was assigned to Region Four's small enforcement office based in Milwaukee. Police work suited her better than lab work. She discovered that she had a talent for the job. She had a good eye for detail and a strength of will that drove her to see a problem to its resolution. Busting lawbreakers made her feel directly involved in saving the environment. Being outdoors, in the field, made her profoundly happy. So when the call came from Terry Winter to lead an investigation on her own, she was excited and ready.

Rhoda took the seat opposite Terry and listened as he outlined the case. "It looks like we have a bird smuggling ring operating in our backyard." This was a surprise. She'd been expecting something more routine like vandalism at one of the dozens of refuges or research stations. The smuggling of endangered species was a common enough crime on the coasts but practically unknown in America's heartland. The various ports of entry was where the smugglers worked.

"The first thing you need to do, Rhoda, is pack a bag. You're flying to Miami at government expense." Any visions of lounging by a pool with a tall drink were dashed when Terry added, "You'll meet up with Karl Costas. He's a CITES agent in Costa Rica." Rhoda knew that CITES, The Convention of Trade in Endangered Species, had investigators scattered throughout the world working

to keep the world's rare and endangered animals in their natural habitat.

"He's escorting a small-time bird smuggler named Julio Guzman to the US. Guzman will be bringing in a few birds strapped to his body. You're to escort Guzman back to Milwaukee, take him to his rendezvous point where you'll record the buy."

"Excuse me, sir," Rhoda almost raised her hand but quickly pulled it down again, embarrassed. "Why is this Guzman person cooperating?"

"He was caught red-handed by the Costa Rican authorities and has agreed to cooperate rather than serve time. Costas said he's given up his whole operation downstream. It's up to us to roll up the network here in the states. You will have a couple of hours between flights in Miami, where we expect to get Guzman outfitted with a wireless transmitter. You'll record his conversation with..."

Rhoda's interrupted again, "I'm sorry, Terry, but I don't know the first thing about hidden microphones and radio surveillance. It just wasn't part of the training."

"Relax, Rhoda, the FBI techs will show you how to work the recording equipment. I understand it's simple; don't worry. With the wire on Guzman, you can be next door at the motel when he meets his buyer, a woman named Marta. You will only be gathering evidence at this point, so don't attempt any arrests. We're hoping Marta will lead you to where she keeps the birds and then up the food chain to the top. The budget is tight, for a change, so you'll have to use local cops for backup. I'll be faxing you your itinerary and other paperwork over in a few minutes. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"By the way, Deerwalker, I just wanted to mention that this case could be a real boost to your career. There's potentially a lot of good press in this for the agency. Do a good job, and people will notice. Just be careful. Keep me in the loop, and don't take any unnecessary chances."

"I'll do my best, sir," she said, her words conveying no

emotion while the grin on her face celebrated her first real assignment.

“I’m sure you will, Rhoda. I’m sure you will.”

When she got back to her desk, Rhoda waited for the faxes. This looked like the sort of case she used to fantasize about. Real bad guys, smuggling, endangered species, exotic birds. When the itinerary arrived, she saw that she had only a few hours to stuff some clothes in a bag and catch a plane to Miami.

In the months following the hit and run, Bill thought about the victim less and less. When he did think about him a couple of things bothered him. The fact that the kid was Mexican or Latino was a little unusual. The great wave of illegal immigration sweeping over the country hadn’t penetrated into rural Wisconsin at least not to the extent it had the cities. They were still a rarity out here in the country. What was the kid doing in the middle of nowhere wearing a tee shirt and torn jeans? It was not what any sane person would be wearing on a cold November day, especially someone thumbing a ride. His pockets held only a few cents, a cotton handkerchief, and a handful of sunflower seeds. It was almost as if the kid had just walked out of a warm house somewhere and stepped in front of a truck. It was the seeds more than anything else that made the case stick in Bill’s mind. He fed his birds the same seeds—raw, unsalted. Had the kid been into birds? Bill liked to think he was..

In Miami, Rhoda spent the night at a hotel near the airport and was at international arrivals bright and early, waiting for the Costa Rican Airlines passengers to clear customs. She had already purchased two tickets on a flight back to Milwaukee scheduled to leave in two hours. She checked her watch and was relieved to see two men walking towards her. She shook hands with Karl Costas, and he introduced her to Julio Guzman. She was reluctant to shake hands with Julio. He represented everything she hated, everything she swore to remove from society, and yet here he was, waltzing through customs, looking smug, and wearing a parrot midriff.

Julio was a dark-skinned Hispanic in his thirties. He gave

Rhoda a smirking once-over that only confirmed her initial dislike. Karl shepherded them into an office in the airport administrative area. “Julio’s been very cooperative,” Costas said, but don’t trust him too much and don’t let him out of your sight.”

He told her that Julio was carrying six birds strapped around his belly — two rare young yellow-throated parrots, three common green parrots, and an especially rare black palm cockatoo — a typical load. The black palm was a hot property and was the sought-after trendy parrot du jour in the United States. Rhoda was surprised that the government of Costa Rica would risk the life of so rare a bird. It was a measure of how seriously CITES was taking this case.

Rhoda questioned Julio about his customary travel arrangements and which flights he caught to Milwaukee and what times they left. Instead of supplying the requested information, he replied, “You gotta be the cutest piece of tail on the force. Ain’t I the lucky man?” Rhoda felt like kicking Julio in the stomach but remembered the birds around his middle and kept control of her temper. “I tell you this, chica, if you don’t get these little fellows to Milwaukee in twenty-four hours, you gonna start losing money. They gonna wake up and get all stressed out, and then you gonna have to drug ’em all over again. Either way, you gonna lose birds, and that’s bad for business.”

Rhoda looked at her watch. They had slightly more than an hour.

Karl paced the floor, checked the time, and said, “We’re supposed to meet a couple of FBI techs here. They’re going to wire Julio so you can record his conversations. Where the hell are those guys, already?”

There was a knock on the door. Two young men entered, one of them carried a suitcase. After a few perfunctory greetings, they opened the case on the nearest desk and removed a wide elastic band with a microphone attached. They motioned for Julio to stand up and remove his shirt. Without his shirt to conceal the birds, everyone could see several tiny heads peeking above a wide

white cloth band wrapped around his middle. The six little birds were sound asleep. Rhoda knew that bird smugglers like Julio preferred Tylenol PM to keep the birds asleep.

“Well, I can see right off the old belly band isn’t going to work,” one of the techies said. “As soon as he removes his shirt to get the birds he’ll be busted. We’ll have to go to plan B, the Peter Meter.”

“You mean the Fly Spy.”

The techies dug further into their gear and came out with a much thinner belt Julio could wear around his hips. This belt sported a tiny microphone, which the technicians attached to the inside of Julio’s fly.

“Just be careful when you take a leak you don’t pull out the wrong device.” This got the techies chuckling so hard that Karl had to remind them they had a plane to catch.

“Please, fellas, we’re in a hurry, and you still have to show Agent Deerwalker here how to use the recorder.”

The techies shook off the giggles and removed a black box from the suitcase. Rhoda paid close attention.

“This ought to take all of thirty seconds,” the techie said to Rhoda. “Push this button to turn the unit on; push this button to record. When you’re finished, you push the first button to turn it off. I think you could train one of those parrots to work this thing. The transmitter and receiver are set to the same frequency; both have enough battery power for forty-eight hours of continuous use. They have an effective range of a quarter of a mile, but closer is better. Any questions?”

“Are the batteries fresh?” Rhoda asked.

“Changed them this morning.”

Rhoda, Costas, and Julio walked to the departure gate, where the plane to Milwaukee was already boarding. More shaking of hands, goodbyes, and good lucks, and just like that, Rhoda was alone with Julio.

## CHAPTER 2

Bill O'Halleran was a bird lover of sorts. A dozen caged canaries filled his doublewide trailer with song. With two or three birds to a cage, the trailer's interior resembled an aviary more than it did a human dwelling. The few friends who knew of his hobby thought he was eccentric. When asked about his birds, Bill would just shrug and say they were good company.

In a small town like Oconee, Wisconsin, Bill was something of an oddity. A big yet mild mannered man not given to fits of temper he seemed ill suited to police work. But as chief of Oconee's three-person police force, Bill O'Halleran was all business. His uniform was clean, starched, and pressed, and his cruiser, a 1996 Dodge Intrepid, was polished and in good repair. The rest of the force consisted of Deputy Harvey Brent and office manager/ dispatcher Rita Cosgrove.

Bill O'Halleran was built like a football player and might have been one if his gentle nature hadn't turned him away from contact sports and into less physical pursuits. He learned police work in the air force as a sergeant in an air police unit in Germany. He answered an ad for police work in rural Wisconsin for lack of any better ideas and found, to his surprise, he actually enjoyed the human contact of small-town policing. He moved to a little house in Oconee with his new wife, Claire, and did his best. Despite the scores of detective novels that lined his shelves, Bill had no delusions that he was much of a cop. His reading gave him an apprecia-

tion for real police work, but living in Oconee didn't provide much opportunity to actually do any.

The criminal life of Oconee, Wisconsin was fairly typical of rural America—an endless series of petty crimes and misdemeanors. Kids spray painting graffiti on the water tower or the railroad bridge, a drunk and disorderly at the Cough-in Lounge, a shoplifter at the Pack and Shop; a stranded motorist on highway 7. The routine sleepy stuff of small-town policing. If anything serious were to happen, and every once in a while something did, Bill called in the state police. The state cops maintained a barracks in Mishula, about an hour's drive north on Route 7. The state police contact for the last ten years had been Detective Ben Greer, a portly thirty-year veteran, two years short of retirement. Well liked and affable, Detective Greer worked a three-county territory which included Oconee.

Greer's workload wasn't too oppressive, either. In the years 2002–2007, for example, in his small area of southern Wisconsin, there were only thirty-two felonies. Of these, twenty-six were either domestic violence, or small-time drug possession. There were four more serious drug busts for dealing and two violent crimes, one rape and one hit and run. The latter being the hitchhiker on highway 7 near Oconee.

Deputy Harvey Brent was a native son. He grew up in an old Oconee family, played basketball and helped the Oconee High School Rangers make the state finals in his senior year. He managed to get two years of community college under his belt before joining the army. He came back to Oconee as soon as his hitch was over and married his high school sweetheart, Cantress Maples. He grew up wanting to be a cop in Oconee and grabbed the job as soon as Bill offered it to him.

Rita Cosgrove turned up in Oconee one day out of the blue. She stepped off the bus at the Greyhound station after an all-night ride from Franklin Park, Illinois. She arrived just as Bill placed an ad in the Oconee Reader for an office manager/dispatcher. She said later at her interview that she was fleeing her bad marriage and

simply bought a bus ticket as far as her \$86 would take her. And since she claimed to have had several years experience managing a big real estate office in Franklin Park, was willing to work for \$9.75/hour and, most likely, because she was single and vulnerable and Bill was a sucker for sad stories, she got the job.

Winter was giving way to Spring, and the land around Oconee was coming alive. Bill was driving through the state forest west of town. It wasn't technically in his jurisdiction, the forest being state land, but he liked the quiet drive through the woods. The first blush of spring colored the trees. The woods offered some decent bird watching, and it never hurt to show a police presence even in the state park. It was still too cold for any but the hardiest campers. Only two campsites showed any signs of life. Bill was just completing the campground loop when Rita's voice broke his reverie.

"Bill, you better get over to the Prairie Moon Trailer Park. Go to 1212 Peach Tree. Shots fired. Domestic disturbance in progress. Sounds like the Stoddards are at it again."

It annoyed Bill that Rita added her personal comments to official transmissions, but he cut her some slack since she ran the office so well. He clicked the mike to transmit and said, "OK, Rita, I'm on my way. I should be there in about ten minutes."

Over the years, he had refereed several dozen shouting matches between the unhappy Stoddards. Their rundown trailer and messy yard were an eyesore in the otherwise tidy environs of Prairie Moon. Bill's trailer was just a couple of doors down from the Stoddards' rusty heap. And even though Bill and some other neighbors did what they could to keep the Stoddard's from dragging down the neighborhood, no matter how much lawn mowing, painting, and trash collecting got done for them, the Stoddard place remained a dump and the ungrateful Stoddards were always expecting more. You could count on them to come knocking at odd hours to "borrow" something, and if you weren't home, they would walk right in and help themselves.

Sylvia Stoddard was almost always drunk and Gus Stoddard was both drunk and crazy. It was a wonder they hadn't killed



each other years ago. The “shots fired” part of Rita’s message was a new and dangerous element in the Stoddard story, and Bill worried how he would handle a gun-toting Stoddard as he drove the ten miles to the trailer park.

When Bill arrived, the Stoddards were stomping around in their front yard, hollering at each other. Gus Stoddard had nothing more in his hand than a pack of firecrackers. Bill watched Gus light and toss one at his wife. There was a small explosion a few inches from her dirty bare feet. Sylvia gave a little shriek and hopped into the air.

So much for “shots fired,” Bill thought, relieved.

Gus Stoddard looked like central casting’s idea of poor white trailer trash. He was dressed in a dirty tee shirt that covered the top half of his beer belly. A cigarette dangled from his lip. He was drunk, filthy, and stinking. He used the butt of his cigarette to light another firecracker and tossed it at his screaming wife.

Bill put on his cop face and said sternly, “Put ’em away, Gus. Do it now, or I’ll write you up for possession of illegal explosives, disturbing the peace, and terrorism.” Bill held out his hand, and Gus quietly handed over the dozen or so firecrackers he had left. Turning his attention to Sylvia, Bill asked, “So, Syl, what’s this all about?”

“Big dumb bastard don’t never do nothing,” Syl grumbled. “Just sits around drinkin’ beer and watchin’ TV all day, the big slob. Ask him to do somethin’, all I get is shit. I’m fed up with this stupid fucker.”

“Okay, Sylvia, I got the picture,” Bill said, cutting her off before she could work herself up. He knew from long experience that her litany of complaints could go on for hours. Entirely justifiable, too. Turning back to Gus, Bill said, “Try to keep it quiet, Gus. If I have to come out here again in the next two weeks, I’m taking you in for a county vacation at the Bridge.” He was referring to the Walter Bridges Correctional Facility forty miles away in Bosco.

Gus Stoddard wiped his nose on his sleeve, mumbled something that sounded vaguely obscene, and walked away. Bill

considered the incident closed and climbed back into his car.

The rest of the day played out in a similar fashion. Routine call after routine call. Oconee was a peaceful community, still largely agricultural but tending toward light industry and residential subdivisions. Located just 60 miles south of urban Milwaukee, the old dairy town was under tremendous pressure to grow. The old small-farm economy was stumbling into the twenty-first century.

There were two more calls that day: a car fire in the supermarket parking lot (expertly handled by Deputy Harvey Brent) and a fender bender on highway 7 near the spot where the body of the hitchhiker was found months before.

The fender bender turned out to be an accident between two senior citizens. Joe Packer, seventy-two, blindly backed out of his driveway in front of Elizabeth Wexler, seventy-six, whose reflexes weren't quite up to avoiding contact with Mr. Packer's left rear fender. Both seniors were loudly accusing each other of lousy driving when Bill arrived to write up the accident report. He calmed them down, made sure no one was hurt, and saw them on their way. It was his private opinion that neither of them should have been driving in the first place. Getting back into his car, he noticed something in the weeds by the roadside. It was a clear plastic bag, its contents obscured by condensation. Bill opened it and saw clothing, men's clothing. Because of the proximity to where the hitchhiker was found, Bill tossed the bag into his trunk for later examination.

## CHAPTER 3

Pressed into a dusty hillside overlooking the village of San Miguel is a cross of white stones. The inhabitants of this southern Honduran town believe the cross protects them from the evils of the world. They are mistaken. The world's evils easily find their way into this tiny village. Over the years, many a young man and several entire families have left in search of a better life in the North. Most have never been heard from again. It is widely assumed that they have come to harm.

Ocone, Wisconsin, and San Miguel, Honduras, seem as different as night and day, but in truth they share many things. They are about the same size; both are rural, agricultural, god-fearing communities struggling to keep their children from wandering away. In terms of income, education, and opportunity, they differ, but on a purely human level, the people who inhabit these two small towns are essentially the same. Parents want the best for their children. Fathers struggle to make a living from the land. Mothers work to keep the family together. A mother worrying about her children is a human constant.

In San Miguel, Anna Maria Alvarez was worried about her Victor. She had not heard from him in many months. No letter and no money. For almost a year, the letters arrived with impressive

regularity. It looked as though things were working out as she had hoped. Victor survived the journey north and with God's help he crossed the border and found work. Anna Maria made the sign of the cross and spit twice on the ground to keep away the evil eye. Victor's luck was a real break for the family. With his job came the monthly envelopes with money in them.

Anna Maria wasn't even sure what Victor's job was. Something to do with birds. She had a mental picture of him, like Saint Francis, surrounded by small birds. She had no idea where Victor was, exactly. His letters said he was in Wisconsin, a place she'd never heard of. It didn't matter where he was. He seemed happy enough, and the money he sent home made a real difference.

Life in San Miguel was a constant struggle—hot, dry, and dirt poor. She needed the money to keep food on the table; a little something for clothes, shoes, and schoolbooks for the little ones; there were even a few coins for the collection plate at morning mass. Another mother down the road in a big white house also worried about her son. Alma Guzman's son Julio had taken another road out of the stultifying poverty of San Miguel. He had gone into smuggling with his cousins. The money he made kept Alma in her big house and enabled her to send her other children to school with shoes on their feet. She could afford to give generously to the church where she prayed daily to keep her son from harm.

Victor's last letter hinted at trouble; a woman, his boss, had a jealous boyfriend. Victor said it was nothing to worry about, but mothers always worried. It was what mothers did. Rich mothers like Alma and poor mothers like Anna Maria. They worried about their boys and they worried what they would do without the money they sent home. One day after church, Anna Maria stayed behind and waited for a chance to speak with Father Alonso.

"It is not like my boy not to write," she told the priest. "Something is wrong. A mother knows."

"You have his last address, yes?" Father Alonso asked with great sympathy.

"Perhaps you can send someone there to see what has happened to

him.”

The priest’s words tumbled around inside Anna Maria’s head. She did not want to risk losing another son. Who would she send? Who would go? Who could survive so dangerous a journey? For several weeks following the talk with the priest, she wrestled with her dilemma. She spoke with her brothers and argued with her husband. “He’s gone,” they would say. “Do you want to lose another child? Who will work the land? Who will take care of you when you get old?”

But the silence from Victor ate a hole in her heart, and the pain of not knowing was the worst pain of all. She would never know peace until she knew what happened to her son. She dried her eyes and went out to find Paco and tell him he would travel in his brother’s footsteps and discover the truth.

## CHAPTER 4

Rhoda and Julio were the last two passengers to board before the attendant sealed the door for takeoff. The mad dash for the plane was unsettling, and Rhoda was relieved to be belted into her seat when the small jet took off for Milwaukee. The flight was smooth and uneventful. Rhoda sat on the aisle and thumbed through the in-flight magazine while the flight attendants inched the beverage cart their way. She would have liked a scotch and soda to calm her nerves but ordered a coffee for herself and a cola for Julio when the cart arrived.

Julio's attempts at conversation were met with icy monosyllables from Rhoda. She felt uncomfortable sitting next to a criminal whom she couldn't arrest, whom she had been ordered, in point of fact, to leave strictly alone in exchange for his cooperation. Given the circumstances, she felt as though she were aiding and abetting in the very crimes she was sworn to prevent. It didn't help that Julio's personality repulsed her. First of all he had that shit-eating grin on his stupid face. Her jaw clenched whenever she thought of those birds sleeping just a few inches away. How many rare birds had this man killed? What kind of deal did he make to be sitting here at the taxpayers' expense? Geez, what a fucked-up situation.

Julio was sitting in the window seat. He looked over at Rhoda and motioned that he wanted to get into the aisle.

"Where do you think you're going?" Rhoda asked.

“Nature calls,” said Julio. “If you don’t mind, I need to use the facilities.”

Rhoda looked at her watch and made a decision. She said, “We’re landing in twenty minutes. Hold it until we get to the motel.”

Julio glowered but sat back in his seat. The next twenty minutes passed in silence.

When the plane landed, Rhoda and Julio gathered their carry-on luggage and walked into the Milwaukee terminal. Rhoda kept a close eye on him at the car rental counter, where she rented a compact car. When they were safely in the car, Rhoda felt herself relax. She half expected Julio to bolt into the crowd and then have to explain to Terry Winter how she lost him. She didn’t want to botch this case especially before it even began.

Julio directed her to the Topeka Motel, a down-at-the-heels dump in a seedy part of town not far from the airport. It was a small two-story concrete block affair with graffiti-stained walls and a neon sign that always read “vacancy.” The desk clerk greeted Julio by name and raised a questioning eyebrow when Rhoda asked for separate rooms. Rhoda walked with Julio up to his room and sat on the bed while he took a long noisy piss. She sat next to him as he picked up the phone and dialed Marta’s cell phone number. She heard a slightly accented voice answer.

“Hello.”

“Marta, honey, it’s me. I’m back, and I have something special for you.”

“Julio! How nice to hear from you. I’m glad you’re back in town. I need to get more help. Get word to your cousin I need another boy or two. What have you got for me this time?”

“Ah, I got a nice load this trip, Marta. Does a Black Palm turn you on?”

“You have Black Palms for me you darling man?” Marta sounded genuinely pleased.

“I have only one on me today, but there’s plenty more

where he came from.”

“OK, baby, I’ll be down to get them in a couple of hours. What’s the bite?”

“I have the Black Palm, two yellow throats, and three common greens. All top-quality stock. Say 15k for the lot. You can get more than that for the Palm alone.”

“I’ll pay the usual thousand per bird. I have a business to run,” Marta’s voice took on a harder edge.

“At least make it ten and you have a deal” said Julio.

“Nine thousand, only because you’re cute. And you have to promise to bring more Black Palms next trip.”

“Agreed.” Julio hung up the phone, looked over at Rhoda, and smiled, “Okay, missy, what we do now? We got time for a quickie.”

Rhoda didn’t rise to the bait. Instead she said, “I want to make sure the transmitter is working. I’m going next door to turn the thing on. You hum or talk to yourself, or better yet, put on the TV so I can hear if it’s working.”

“I need to take these birds off and take a shower,” said Julio unbuttoning his shirt. “Sure you wouldn’t like to shower with me?”

Rhoda went next door and took out the recorder. She put on the headphones and listened intently. She heard the sound of the television and Julio moving around; he was muttering to himself in Spanish. She jumped to her feet at the amplified sound of Julio pulling down his zipper. She had forgotten that the microphone was inside Julio’s fly. Satisfied that the recorder worked, she lay back on the bed and waited. She could hear Julio showering and singing some bawdy song right through the thin motel wall. She kept her eye on the window to make sure Julio wasn’t trying to sneak away. She was tired and would have loved a shower herself but figured it wasn’t a good idea just then. Besides, the shower at the Topeka was filthy and smelled of mold. Instead, she paced the floor, read a magazine, and checked the street every few minutes.

After a three-hour wait, an old red pickup truck pulled



into the motel lot. There was a young Hispanic at the wheel and a middle-aged woman sitting beside him. The woman got out and removed a fair-sized pet carrier from behind the seat. She mounted the stairs and knocked on Julio's door. Rhoda switched on the recorder and put on the headphones. She could hear as clearly as if she were in the room with them.

"Marta! Come in. Good to see you again."

"Good to see you too, Julio. Looking as handsome as ever."

"You're the looker here, Marta. How's business?"

"It's getting to be more than we can handle. We're thinking of expanding. Building a second birdhouse. It'll mean we'll need more help, so ask your connection to bring me a couple of fresh bodies."

"I'll tell my cousin. How many more muchachos?"

"Two more will do. So what have we here? Oooh, That Black Palm's a beauty. I'll get a good price for him. Let me just pack these babies up. Here's your money. Always a pleasure doing business with you. Give us a kiss. I'd love to hang around and play hide-the-parrot with you but I'm on a tight schedule." Julio took the cash and put it in his jacket pocket without counting it. The whole transaction took less than fifteen minutes, less time than it took to check in to the motel.

At the door Marta gave Julio a sexy wink, "Bring me more Black Palms, and I'll arrange a little bonus." She took the birds to the waiting truck and got in beside the young Hispanic driver. Rhoda waited until the truck pulled into the street before giving chase.

Marta's pick up weaved in and out of city streets, heading generally south. After a couple of miles, the truck stopped at Norman's Feeds, a feed store on the city's edge. Rhoda watched the young Mexican driver load a half dozen fifty-pound sacks of birdseed into the back of the truck. She followed the truck onto the interstate for three exits until it turned off at Oconee. The truck made a couple of turns on small state roads, finally turning into a driveway.

Rhoda passed by the old farmhouse slowly and read the number on the mailbox — 1175. She continued down the road until she came to an intersection. She made a note that she was on State Route 706. She now had the address of the birdhouse and marked its approximate location on her map. She turned around and passed the driveway in the opposite direction. She saw the young Hispanic stacking the sacks of birdseed into a rickety barn. The house was a typical farmhouse, one of thousands that mark the passing of family-run dairy farms in the midwest. All around the old house were overgrown pastures and weedy fields separated by windbreaks and the occasional stream. In no time, she was past the house and didn't dare pass by again. She looked for a place to conceal the car and herself for future surveillance, a place where she could observe the comings and goings at the house. There didn't seem to be such a place. But at least the birdhouse had been located, and that was progress.

When she arrived back at the Topeka Motel, she was not surprised to find Julio gone, his room empty. Julio's whereabouts were not her problem. She had bigger fish to fry.

## CHAPTER 5

At the end of another day, Bill sat at his desk reading phone messages as Rita prepared to leave.

“Harvey called. Said he’d be late. Said he had to pick up his niece. She missed the bus.”

“I’ll lock up,” said Bill, “You go home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, then.”

“Night.”

Bill went out to the parking lot to get the bag of clothes just as Harvey drove up in the old cruiser, the one with the town seal hanging crooked on the door.

“Hello, Boss,” Harvey said.

“Hey, Harve. How’s it goin’?”

“Just another day serving and defending. The old cruiser’s acting up again, overheating. What’s that?” Harve asked, nodding towards the sack of clothes in Bill’s trunk. “You been picking up litter again?”

“It’s clothes, I found them out on Highway 7, near where that Spanish kid got hit a few months back. You’d think the state cops would’ve found it.”

“Could have been tossed later,” Harvey said simply.

“That’s true, or maybe Greer just plain missed it. Let’s take

it inside and see what we got.”

They brought the bag of clothes into the office and dumped it out on Rita’s desk. The bag held mostly wadded-up underwear and tee shirts. There was little else, a pair of khaki chinos, one short sleeve shirt, and a pair of shabby black jeans. Picking through the underwear with a couple of ballpoint pens, Harvey said, “Yuccchhhh, gross.”

Bill looked through the pockets of the jeans, turning them inside out one by one. In one pocket, he found a few damp sunflower seeds and a wadded-up matchbook, its red tips all melted and soggy. The matchbook was gold foil, the black lettering on the cover read “Dells Inn, Talon, WI.”

“I know that place,” said Harvey. “It’s a classy joint a few miles south of here, near the tourist area. Hey, maybe the kid worked there.”

“Yeah, maybe. You know, we found the same seeds in the dead kid’s pocket,” said Bill. “You remember that, don’t you?”

“Lots of people eat sunflower seeds, Bill, that’s why they sell them all over the place,” Harvey shrugged.

Bill just grunted and studied the matchbook more closely. “Does that look like writing to you? A number or a name or something?” he began opening drawers in Rita’s desk.

“What are you looking for?”

“Magnifying glass. Rita keeps one in here someplace.”

Through the glass, Bill could just make out the last three letters of what might be a name and three digits of what might be a phone number. “‘I-N-E’ and 726 or is that ‘E-N-E’ and 926?”

“Christine, Irene, Maybelline? Could be any of those,” said Harvey, taking his turn with the glass. “Assuming it’s a woman’s name in the first place, that is.”

“I think we ought to send this bag of rags up to the state lab; what do you think? Let the lab boys see what else they can find.”

“It’s your call, Chief. Personally, I think it’s a waste of time.”

Not one to procrastinate, Bill dialed Greer’s office and was

told by his answering machine to leave a message, or “if it’s important,” to call his mobile phone. Bill wasn’t sure that what he found was important, but he dialed the number anyway and waited for Greer to pick up. Bill told Greer what he had found. Impulsively, he didn’t mention the matchbook or the sunflower seeds.

Greer said, “This is what you call me at home for? It’s most likely somebody’s dirty laundry. A bag of crap someone tossed there last week. Didn’t I tell you a hundred times to leave a closed case closed? But if it’ll make you happy, Bill, I’ll swing by tomorrow, pick it up, and deliver it over to the lab for a look-see. Just leave it with Rita.”

When Bill got off the phone, Harvey asked, “Why didn’t you tell him about the matches and the seeds? And the writing we found? Maybe he’d of taken you more seriously then.”

Bill scratched his cheek and shrugged. “I don’t know; let’s see how sharp those state lab boys really are,” he said. “I mean if they missed finding the whole damn bag. Let’s just put this stuff back in the pockets where we found ‘em. No harm done. We’ll see what the lab report says. I’m getting kind of sick of Greer treating me like an imposter. I’m as much cop as he is; hell, I just may solve this case myself.”

Harvey got a laugh from that. “Bill O’Halloran, man hunter,” he chuckled. “Or how about the Oconee Bureau of Investigation?”

“Why the hell not?” said Bill. “We are cops, aren’t we?”

## CHAPTER 6

There's big money in birds. Certain rare and exotic birds, that is. In fact, the rarer and more endangered the bird, the bigger the price, and Gerald Levine knew what price to set. To the penny.

Colorful tropical birds like macaws, parrots, and cockatoos are highly sought after by collectors, who will pay serious money to own one, but their beauty was lost on a man like Gerald Levine. To him birds were just a commodity. Another bookkeeping entry in a portfolio of legal and illegal businesses. The fact that were intelligent exotic creatures with complex social structures never entered his consciousness. In that way he could be thought of as cruel and heartless but in other ways Gerald Levine was kind and good. He took care of his brother, Arthur, and their aged mother. He gave generously to several charities and served on the boards of a half dozen cultural organizations without pay.

Levine fell into the bird business quite by accident. He had acquired a failing restaurant called the Tropicale several years earlier when the original owner got behind on his loan. Levine was forced to send Hugo Dunn to negotiate a deal. A deal was always easier to make after Hugo Dunn discussed the terms. Hugo, a gorilla of a man with a mean streak and an astonishing lack of character, was Levine's enforcer.

Levine was pleased with the Tropicale settlement. The frightened proprietor signed the whole business over to Levine in

exchange for living to see old age. The property alone was worth twice the amount of the loan. The restaurant enjoyed a good location and survived by serving mediocre food to tourists. It didn't have much of a reputation. Its decor was faux Polynesian, and the menu was heavy on dishes with names like coconut shrimp and mahi-mahi. It had a tiki bar that served drinks in tall glasses with lots of fruit and tiny umbrellas. The first thing customers saw when they entered was an aviary filled with colorful birds.

Levine had no real interest in owning a tacky business like the *Tropicale*. His intentions from the start was, as he instructed his new partners, was to “torch the joint.” He knew he didn't have to worry about an arson charge. Thanks to his new partner's impeccable connections that simply wasn't going to happen. Besides, a little insurance money would go a long way in cementing this new relationship. Levine and his new friend thought it a good idea to sell off a few of the old restaurant's assets before the fire. The shocker came when they were offered 12K for the half-dozen ratty looking parrots in the front window. It was their first taste of the illicit bird business, and they liked it. After some additional research, Levine decided to add birds to his growing business empire. After the fire, he rebuilt the property into the more upscale *Dell's Inn*. He had bigger plans for the parrots.

Gerry Levine was a moneyman, an investor. He would be the first to admit that he had little talent for the nuts and bolts of running a business. For the day-to-day donkeywork of keeping his various enterprises humming, Levine believed in delegating the operation to capable subordinates and giving them a share of the profits. He wanted the best people running his various ventures—these ventures included loan sharking, real estate, prostitution, and drugs. It was more expensive doing business this way, but it was smart. By making his managers partners, he could concentrate on what he did best—making money. The subordinates had an incentive to make the business work, and since the managers only dealt with Hugo Dunn, never directly with him, he enjoyed an extra layer of protection from any unpleasant consequences. Gerald

Levine's golden rule read "just make it pay."

To supervise the bird business, Levine hired Marta Pekovic, a middle-aged Czech woman with a long resumé in smuggling, a long thin body, and an appetite for young men. Marta brought the right amount of professionalism to the job. She was careful and discreet, and she knew her way around smugglers. While she had no experience with birds, she knew how to smuggle and how to deal with those who made smuggling their profession. In her past, Marta had smuggled arms, drugs, and currency. She didn't think parrots would be too much different. As it turned out, they weren't that different, and before long, Marta had made the necessary contacts and the business was turning a tidy profit. The money was good, the hours were good, and with three or four young men around at all times, the future looked rosy, indeed.

One thing that was different about parrots from, say, guns or drugs was the fact that parrots were alive and had to be fed and cared for. Dead birds were worthless. Levine set Marta up in a rural farmhouse he had acquired. He had the place gutted and rebuilt as a large aviary. There was a small apartment for Marta on the top floor and a dormitory that housed three or four illegal alien workers with their own kitchen and bathroom in the basement. The rest of the house consisted of wire cages. There were more than twenty large cages, and they could house up to twenty birds each. At times, the noise alone was enough to drive a person mad. It was the nightmare opposite of Bill's birdsong-filled trailer.

The Hispanic boys kept the birds fed and watered, cleaned the cages, and buried the dead. They also got to entertain Marta on occasion, which suited them just fine. Other forms of recreation for young men in rural Wisconsin were rather limited. Like illegals everywhere, they worked hard and were happy to have good paying jobs. Hugo impressed on them the need to keep a low profile and never to speak of their jobs. There was little need to worry. There weren't many Spanish speakers in Oconee, and Hugo was very convincing. Besides, he let them know that he hated them, especially those who succumbed to Marta's charms. Hugo carried a



torch for Marta. He never told her about his feelings for her, but his jealous rages against the boys made it pretty obvious to everyone.

Marta proved to be an inspired choice to run the bird operation. After a few months, she was bringing rare birds in from Brazil, Central America, and the Caribbean. Organized bands of bird pirates in parrot-rich countries kept her supplied. These bandits gathered eggs and young chicks from nests in protected areas. The fertile eggs and newborn chicks were sent to clandestine hatcheries, where they were incubated and raised until old enough to travel. Many chicks were lost through inadequate care, but many survived and were packed away for transport.

When deemed ready for market, the birds were drugged and packed in a variety of containers for shipment to the US. Marta's suppliers hid birds in car doors, suitcases, and cardboard cartons and mixed them in with household goods, produce, and machinery. Once the birds arrived at their destination, the precious cargo moved through various middlemen until it reached Marta's holding facility. There, after a harrowing ordeal lasting several days, the traumatized survivors were allowed to rest and recuperate. They were the lucky ones who had not died of suffocation, starvation, heat, cold, or trauma on their way to market.

Once the birds were recovered from their ordeal, they were sold into a shadowy underground of crooked dealers and disreputable pet shops. They were sold to zoos, collectors, and status-hungry celebrities. Because the risks were so great, the supply so limited, and the demand so strong, the surviving birds commanded very high prices. The fact that those birds represented an irreplaceable resource did not seem to bother the illicit consumer, and the smugglers would have happily stolen the last bird from the last nest in order to make a sale.

In 1992, the plight of endangered birds had become so severe, the situation so critical, and the alarm of biologists so shrill that the world was finally moved to action. That year, several nations got together and passed the Convention on International

Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES. It is currently signed by 169 nations. This agreement virtually stopped the illegal bird trade in its tracks—for a while. Fortunately for the Gerald and Martas of the world, human greed and corrupt officials have revived the loathsome practice. Today, the trade in endangered species is as big as it ever was. Despite the best efforts of the world's conservation authorities, the future is looking bright for the likes of Gerald Levine, Marta Pekovic, and bird smugglers everywhere

Aside from CITES, the United States has strong laws prohibiting trafficking in wild birds. And while these laws further slow the illegal parrot trade, they have the perverse effect of making the traffic in rare animals even more lucrative and driving it further underground. Today, the price for a Black Palm cockatoo rivals that of a stolen Rembrandt, and like its art world counterpart, it cannot be displayed in public.

As the bird business grew from a half-dozen to more than two hundred birds a month, Marta realized she needed help keeping the birds fed, healthy, and alive until they were sold. Sick birds needed to be nursed, the cages needed to be cleaned and shipments needed to be packed and delivered. She needed a competent staff to look after things while she was away making deals and filling orders. Marta asked Dunn for permission to hire more workers and to replace those who had disappeared. Dunn ran it by Levine and got the OK.

The pipeline for illegal aliens was through a freelance bird smuggler named Julio Guzman. Julio was a well connected Costa Rican who hailed from a long line of smugglers. One of Julio's brothers made his living as a coyote, smuggling illegal aliens across the border into the USA. Every six weeks or so, Julio met Marta at a sleazy motel near the Milwaukee Airport, where he delivered eight or ten rare birds. His several thousand dollars profit enabled Julio to live a fairly comfortable lifestyle in Costa Rica. Marta didn't really need the few birds Julio brought in each month, but she needed Julio to keep her supplied with illegals, who were

a rare commodity in rural Wisconsin. Whenever Marta needed an employee, Julio arranged it.

Julio had engineered a smooth and efficient operation for bringing in his birds. His source of supply was solid and cheap: a bunch of cousins who raided the unguarded national parks that provided the last remaining habitat for some highly endangered species. By keeping his deliveries small, he was not on anyone's radar. To keep his risks to a minimum, Julio paid bribes to a customs inspector at the airport in San Carlos. Every six weeks or so, Julio drugged his birds with Tylenol PM and strapped them to his body under his shirt. He dressed like a businessman in a white shirt and tie and a crisp navy blue suit. He looked chubby and prosperous. He carried an attaché case in one hand and to complete the disguise, a small potted plant in the other. At the airport, the customs inspector confiscated the plant and waved Julio through. Later, the inspector pulled up the plant and retrieved the wad of bills buried in the dirt.

When Julio landed in Miami, his attaché case was often opened and inspected but he was never patted down. He was just another anonymous businessman shuttling back and forth from Latin America, sharing in the booming NAFTA economy. Once through customs, Julio hopped on a plane to Milwaukee, met Marta at the Topeka Motel, and completed the deal. He was paid around a thousand dollars for each live bird. Even deducting expenses, Julio cleared around six grand per trip. Marta didn't ask where the birds came from, and Julio didn't ask where they went. Six weeks later, he did the same thing all over again.

Everything worked well for a couple of years until the customs inspector got careless and was caught by a security camera pocketing the bribe. The guilty agent was brought before his superiors and after being threatened with a drug charge and ten years in prison, the poor frightened wretch confessed.

"Not drugs! No, no! Birds! It was only birds," he pleaded. The inspector readily gave up Julio in an effort to save his skin. It was arranged that the inspector stay on the job and point Julio out

to the authorities.

Julio's next trip to the airport did not go so well. His friend at customs seemed nervous and distracted. Two men collared Julio and tossed him into a locked room. They were CITES investigators working with the Costa Rican government. Julio was searched, and when ten drugged birds were found on his person, he was arrested. Caught red-handed, he had little choice but to cooperate. They told him his options.

"You're looking at five years for each bird and a twenty-five-thousand-dollar fine. The only way you can beat this thing is to come clean and tell us everything, give us every name, both up and down the line. Cooperate with us, and we'll let you walk."

Julio was no fool. He sang like one of Bill's canaries. He told them how he got the birds and where he delivered them. He told them all about meeting Marta at the Topeka Motel. He told them he didn't know where Marta took them but that wasn't his problem. He told them everything they wanted to know and when he was finished, he told them again.

The CITES people were excited. They realized that Julio could lead them up the chain to Marta, and if they were lucky, all the way to the top. Working down the chain would net a few small-time pirates, and that was a good thing, too.

Later that day, CITES officer Karl Costas called Terry Winter at the Fish & Wildlife Service office in Milwaukee. The wheels were set in motion, and Rhoda Deerwalker was on her way to Miami and her first field assignment.

## CHAPTER 7

Every evening when Bill opened his trailer door, a cacophony of bird calls greeted his return. Every evening, he spoke to the birds as he filled their seed cups and changed their water bowls. As they began their conversation that evening, he realized that he had been talking to his birds ever since the breakup with Claire. How many years was that? Eight? Jesus. Well, so what? It soothed him and helped him decompress, and he didn't feel the empty loneliness his life had become. He changed the newspaper on the bottoms of some of the dirtier cages and told his feathered audience about his day. He told them about the Stoddards and the firecrackers, about the fender bender, and, of course, about the bag of clothes, which he felt pretty strongly belonged to the hitchhiker.

“You know, I didn't tell Greer about the matchbook. Let's see if Mr. Super Cop can find it on his own. I've a good mind to check out this Dell's Inn place myself. What do you guys think?”

Bill went on this way for quite a while. He made himself some dinner, checked his messages, and then turned on the TV. At ten o'clock, he covered the cages for the night, got into bed with a crime novel, and covered himself. This had been his routine for the past eight years. They were lonely years but quieter and more peaceful than the rough-and-tumble six years of marriage. Six years of squabbling unhappiness, in which the bitterness grew like a smothering vine until neither could breathe. The inevitable divorce was a relief to them both. Mercifully, there were no children.

He would have liked a few kids, but she wasn't interested, and after a couple of years they couldn't think beyond the arguments.

At six o'clock in the morning, Bill uncovered the cages, had his usual English muffin and coffee breakfast, and arrived at his town hall office at 7:30 sharp. He was usually the first one there. He started the coffeemaker and checked the fax machine. The faxes read like tabloid headlines for a series of heartbreaking stories—of runaway teens and state police advisories, of a bank robbery in Milwaukee, and of a mysterious death at the university in Madison.

Rita came in at eight, followed by Harvey a few minutes later. Bill handed Rita the bag of clothing and told her to give it to Greer when he stopped by. "Say, Rita," he said, "where's the file on that John Doe hitchhiker we had a few months back?"

She walked to the row of filing cabinets along the wall and found it in a second.

"Right here under Doe."

Bill took the slim file to his desk and read his original report and the medical examiner's report the state had faxed to him. Bill's original report indicated that there were no skid marks on the highway, which meant the driver made no attempt to stop. Bill found this fact disturbing at the time, and remembered mentioning it to Greer and Greer telling him it was not so unusual. It may have been a drunk driver not seeing the kid or any number of other factors. The ME estimated the hitchhiker's age at nineteen or twenty, and the rest of the description read: Hispanic, male, old appendix scar, brown hair and eyes, no ID. At the bottom of the report was a list of personal effects: plaid shirt/medium, black jeans 30-inch waist/30 inseam. The same size as the clothes in the bag he found yesterday. Cause of death: blunt trauma, multiple broken bones, internal bleeding, consistent with a hit and run. He put away the file, tipped his hat to Rita, and went to work.

Several days passed, and Bill heard nothing from Greer. He had almost forgotten the whole matter until Greer walked in and disrupted the morning routine. Bill poured him a coffee and they

chatted for a while.

Finally, Greer said, “The clothes came up negative for any connection to the John Doe.”

“Is there a report?” asked Bill, blowing on his cup.

“What, you don’t believe me? Here.” Greer reached into his jacket and handed over a state police lab report. “The report says the clothes are the same size as the deceased but can’t say for sure that they belonged to him.”

“So that’s that?” Bill said. “No clues?”

“What the hell did you expect? Fingerprints from the dirty underwear?” sneered Greer. “At least you finally got your skid marks.” Greer roared at his joke. “That was rich,” he said, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, “Nice try, Billy Boy. I told you it was a waste of time. But even if it turned out the stuff was the kid’s, the lead doesn’t go anywhere. It’s a dead end. Finding his wardrobe doesn’t get us any closer to solving this thing.”

After Greer left, Bill read the lab report over more closely. The clothes were examined and compared to the clothes taken from the body. There were no laundry stamps or other distinguishing marks. The clothing labels were common. The pants and shirts showed heavy signs of wear. Everything was the same size as the clothing the hitchhiker wore, but that was all that could be said about them. Under “contents of pockets” was typed the word “empty.” There was no mention of the sunflower seeds. No analysis of the washed-out writing on the matchbook. In fact, there was no mention of the matchbook at all. What kind of crime lab was this?

The report was signed by an A. Wineguard, crime lab supervisor. Bill had met Arnold Wineguard once or twice but didn’t really know the man. Wineguard had a good reputation around the state for thoroughness. His forensic analysis was well respected. How could a professional like that miss such an obvious piece of evidence? The answer, of course, was that he couldn’t. Either he never saw the matchbook or he deliberately left it out of his report—or maybe Greer doctored the report. There was only one way

to know for certain.

Bill impulsively picked up the phone, intending to put the question to Greer directly. But then he realized if Greer was responsible, all he would get was an earful of doubletalk and lies. At the last second, he stayed his hand, dialed the crime lab instead, and asked to speak to Dr. Wineguard. After he was left on hold for a while, Wineguard's secretary answered.

"This is Doris; can I help you, Chief?"

"I'd like to speak with Dr. Wineguard, please"

"Dr. Wineguard's in the lab. Is there anything I can do for you"?

"Yeah, Doris. I was just looking at Dr. Wineguard's report on a case that I'm working on, and now, for the life me, I can't find it. I either mislaid the thing, or even worse, got it mixed up with another file; in which case I'll never find it."

"I know just what you mean, Chief. Your office sounds about as organized as mine."

"Well, I was hoping you could fax me over another copy. It was case file John Doe 11/05 and it had to do with the analysis of some clothes we found. Does it ring a bell? The clothes were sent over via Detective Ben Greer about two weeks ago, and the report was dated last Thursday. Let's see ... that would make it June 28."

"OK, Chief, I should be able to find a copy. Give me your phone and fax numbers and I'll get back to you as soon as I have something."

"Thanks, Doris." Bill hung up the phone and headed to work. If he had an uncompromised copy of the report, Bill felt, he might have a better idea what was going on.

It's a long way from Honduras to Oconee, Wisconsin. A long way in miles, 2,463 to be precise, but even longer in terms of personal transformation. From the moment Paco flagged down the old school bus on the paved road outside San Miguel, he faced a world very different from anything he had known. The road north was harsh, and the lessons it taught were often painful and difficult.



It ran through an unforgiving world of human predators, people whose very reason for being was to prey upon the human traffic heading north.

Paco's first cruel lesson came on a country road outside the first big town on his route. Three days from home and still many hundreds of miles from the border, Paco was waiting for a ride or a bus, whichever came first, when a car pulled over. Paco's spirits lifted at the thought of a free ride, and he sprinted toward the car. When he reached it, however, the dusty doors flew open, and without any preamble, four teenage boys jumped out and began to pummel and kick Paco, only stopping when he collapsed, senseless.

They took everything he had, even his small bundle of clothes and food. They laughed at him and called him a hayseed before they drove away. Dazed, Paco crawled to the side of the road and took stock of his condition. He was bruised and bloody, but otherwise unharmed. He was badly shaken and his vulnerability was now painfully obvious. He vowed to be more cautious. When he walked into town to complain to the local police, they laughed and jeered and ran him off with threats of a worse beating. He learned that he could rely on help from no one. He had only his own strength and will to see him through.

Struggling north, Paco was reduced to begging. He slept in barns and fields. He ate in charity kitchens when he was lucky and from garbage cans when he was not. Now and then, he met with kindness. Once, a priest gave him a few pesos and a blessing. Once, a kitchen maid gave him a meal of leftovers and a napkin filled with stale tortillas. But more often, Paco met with indifference and hostility. He was beaten by police for loitering and robbed at knifepoint by a young fellow who he seemed to befriend him.

Then, there were the constant discomforts of living at the mercy of nature—rainstorms when he had no shelter and unceasing desert heat that brought him unrelenting thirst. After fifteen weeks on the road, a gaunt and tired Paco trudged the last dusty miles into

Juarez on the Texas-Mexico border. The boy who arrived in Juarez was a different creature from the one who left San Miguel on his youthful adventure. Physically, he was leaner and weaker; mentally, he was tougher; and spiritually, he was hard, focused, and no longer naive.

## CHAPTER 8

On the afternoon of July 1, Bill and Harvey heard Rita's excited voice on the radio: "Hey, listen up, guys, there's a fire at the old packing plant on seventeen. I already called the volunteers. So hightail it over there, and be careful."

Bill slapped the red light on the roof of his old Toyota and gave it the gas. As he sped down the highway, he heard an excited Harvey give a rebel yell and say, "I'm only a minute away, Bill; I bet I'll be there five minutes before you."

Bill was driving his beat-up Toyota Camry that day. It was his personal car, but he had to use it because the old cruiser was in the shop for repairs for the umpteenth time. As a result of the car hassle, Harvey got to use the new cruiser and Bill got to charge the town twelve cents a mile plus wear and tear on his car. The only thing that made Bill's car look official was a magnetic sign on the door that said Oconee PD and the red roof light plugged into the cigarette lighter. It made the Oconee PD look even more rinky-dink than usual. Bill arrived a couple of minutes after Harvey. As he pulled up behind him, he could hear the faint wail of sirens in the distance. The volunteers were on their way.

Harvey's car door was wide open. Bill could see him sitting behind the wheel. Already, a small crowd of onlookers was forming, and Bill wondered why Harvey was just sitting there, apparently admiring the black smoke and orange flame pouring from

the empty building.

When Bill looked in on Harvey, he found him sitting in a puddle of blood. He had been shot through the chest, his breath coming fast and shallow. Blood was everywhere. A lot of blood. A huge red stain soaked Harvey's shirt and a pool was forming in his lap. Bill thanked his lucky stars that Harvey was still alive. Years later, Bill would remember the bewildered expression on Harvey's face, as if getting shot was the last thing he expected.

"Hang in there, Harvey; help is on the way," Bill was barely keeping his panic under control. He had to do something to stop the bleeding. He had to call for an ambulance. His first reaction was to pat the stricken man's shoulder, but he stopped himself, his hand hovering above the blood-soaked shirt. Confused, panicky, Bill rushed back to his car and using his radio, asked Rita to call an ambulance. He could have simply reached over and used Harvey's radio, but he wasn't thinking straight and the sight of all that blood was making him sick.

Bill rummaged through the junk in his glove compartment until he found his tiny first aid kit. He crouched and ran in a zigzag back to Harvey and knelt at his side. It was immediately obvious that the good people who packaged this particular first aid kit had smaller wounds in mind—more on the order of insect bites than sucking chest wounds. Bill took out his pocket handkerchief, a red bandanna, and pressed it hard against Harvey's chest. It instantly turned a darker shade of red.

By now, the fire truck was pulling in. It was followed by several volunteers in private cars. Pandemonium resulted when Ron Barrow, the fire chief, spotted the injured man. The festive mood of the firemen, who had been expecting an abandoned-building fire, was dashed by the sight of blood. The happy crew of firefighters became a disciplined band of professionals. The firemen possessed professional medical equipment, including a serious first aid kit. Those volunteers with emergency medical training got to work on Harvey with pressure bandages and oxygen. While the medics worked on Harvey, another group of volunteers dragged

hoses off the pumper and begin wetting down the fire.

After a few minutes, the ambulance arrived, and in a blur of transfusions, injections, and stethoscope-wearing paramedics, Harvey was whisked away to the hospital. Bill called a worried Rita and gave her an update; he also asked her to call the state police and Harvey's wife, Cantress. Rita said she had already made the calls.

In the excitement and confusion, it barely occurred to Bill that the shooter might still be around. Remembering his duty, Bill began to consider the fire as a crime scene, starting with the cruiser. There was a bullet hole in the windshield about midway down, suggesting a trajectory that pointed roughly to the roof of the burning building. The volunteers were getting the fire under control, but at the moment, there wasn't any chance of going up on the roof for a look. So, Bill did the next best thing and circled the building. He pushed several people, mostly neighborhood kids, a safe distance away and started to scope out the scene. He even unsnapped his revolver, something he had never had to do before. In all his years in Oconee, he had never needed to draw his weapon. He had never taken it from its holster except for target practice and the occasional cleaning. But now there was the chance of real danger. The pop of the brass snap sent a thrill down his spine.

The sides and rear of the old block structure were littered with years of trash. On the top of a debris pile at the back of the building, Bill found an aluminum extension ladder. It had been knocked over into the trash. Bill dragged the ladder away from the building. If the shooter used it to gain access to the roof, then it might have fingerprints on it.

Beyond the litter behind the building, Bill saw a chain link fence torn in many places. The fence separated the old packing plant from the raw earth of a new housing subdivision. A large vacant lot with a makeshift ball field lay just beyond the fence. The nearest house was a quarter mile away. Bill pictured the sequence of events in his mind. The shooter started a fire, called it in on

his cell phone, waited on the roof, and shot the first responder to arrive. Motivation unknown. Shooter escaped down the ladder, through the fence, and away.

Beyond the fence were fields and newly leveled lots. A group of young boys with baseball mitts and bats stood mutely by the fence, watching the firemen. Bill went over to the boys and asked if they had seen anyone. Some shook their heads yes, some no. Bill addressed one of the affirmative-nodding boys and asked what he saw. "A man walking fast, holding a package; he got in a car, and drove away."

"Did you see what kind of car?"

"Just a car," the kid said.

"Did you get a look at his face?"

"Nope."

Bill took a few names and after completing his circuit of the building, walked over to Ron Barrow.

"How's it going, Ron?" he asked the fire chief.

"The roof's a total loss. If someone doesn't repair it soon, the building'll fall to ruin in a couple of years. Wasn't much use, anyway. These old buildings are just a fire waiting to happen. You figure out what the shootin' was about?"

"Looks like someone didn't like cops," was Bill's response.

Bill hung around until Greer arrived, followed closely by the crime scene van and a couple of uniformed officers. The officers went to work immediately, unspooling yellow tape around the cruiser and the building. Bill showed Greer the ladder and turned over the names of the witnesses he had gathered. Greer shoved Bill's notes into his pocket and said, "I hope to hell you didn't mess up my crime scene."

Bill, already feeling superfluous, shrugged and said, "I tried not to."

"So, what do you think happened here, Bill? You think we have a random shooter or someone who just didn't like your deputy?" Greer stood there exuding arrogance, snapping his gum,

and waiting for an answer.

“Well, hell, Ben, without knowing any facts, I’d say it was impossible to tell,” Bill replied.

“That’s exactly why we’re here, Bill, to find some facts. We’ll do a ballistics check on the bullet, see if we find any shell casings on what’s left of that roof; maybe we’ll get lucky and lift some prints off that ladder you found. But barring any miracles of modern crime analysis, which in my opinion only tends to muck things up, what a good cop is left with is his instinct, his cop’s nose. And my nose is telling me we ain’t never gonna know what the hell happened here. We’ll see what we can find, but my money’s on this being a random thing.”

Bill’s nose was telling him just the opposite. Bill’s nose was screaming that poor Harvey had taken a bullet meant for him, that only the breakdown of the old cruiser had saved him from a bullet in his chest and a trip to the county hospital. But he kept his suspicions to himself. He was anxious to leave. He shrugged off Greer’s arrogant lecture and climbed into his Camry.

“Nice ride, Bill, very professional,” Greer said giving Bill’s makeshift police car the once-over. “I’ll bet that strikes fear into the hearts of men.” A chuckling Greer gave him a mock salute as he pulled away. He drove to the hospital as fast as the old Camry would let him. He needed to be at Harvey’s side, not standing here watching “real” cops work.

At the hospital, he learned that Harvey was in surgery. The bullet pierced a lung and narrowly missed his heart. He had lost a tremendous amount of blood, and saving him was a near thing. Cantress was there, worried and weeping. He wrapped her in a comforting hug, patted her gently, and muttered platitudes into her ear. “Everything’s going to be alright. He’ll be fine. I’ll find out who did this; don’t worry.” He hadn’t the faintest idea how that last bit would happen, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

A doctor came over to them and announced, to everyone’s relief, that Harvey was going to be all right. “He’ll be in the ICU

for a while, but he might be well enough to see visitors in a day or two.”

Word of the shooting spread quickly. How the stations in Milwaukee got wind of it, Bill would never know, but the first reporters and news vans were setting up as Bill left the hospital. A half-dozen news crews surged toward him, brandishing microphones and shouting questions. He walked straight to his car, ignoring their questions and offering only a terse “no comment” in response. Let Greer and the state police manage the story; it was their case, after all. He got into his old Camry and drove to his office.

There were more reporters in front of the town hall but Bill gave them the silent treatment, too. He closed the office door with a sigh of relief. Rita was still there, worried and concerned, even though it was many hours past the end of her workday. She said, “The phone hasn’t stopped ringing. Everyone wants a statement.”

“They’ll have to wait for the state police or the DA to fill them in. The good news is Harvey’s gonna be all right.”

“Thank God,” said Rita putting on her coat. “What kind of maniac would do such a thing?”

“There’s a lot of sick people in this world,” said Bill. “Go home and get some rest, Rita. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” said Rita, “There’s a fax on your desk from the police lab. Something you requested.”

After Rita left, Bill sat at his desk and picked up the copy of the faxed lab report. It was an exact duplicate of the one Greer had given him. He compared the two reports carefully, line by line. They were identical. This told him that Greer did indeed give the bag of clothes to the lab. It also told him that Greer must have removed the seeds and matchbook from the pants pocket. Why the hell would he do that? Right then, Bill was too upset to care. His mind full of blood, smoke, and weeping women, Bill wound a crime report form into his old typewriter and began to write up the events of that painful day.

Later, at home with his birds, Bill found himself physically



and emotionally drained. He summoned the energy to take care of his birds, talking to them as he worked. He told them of Greer's strange behavior and confided to them his uncertainty at what to do next. He gave them the bad news about Harvey but told them how relieved he was that he was going to be okay. He warned them that he wouldn't be home as much as usual because with Harvey out of commission, he'd have to work a double shift. He covered the cages, got into bed, and covered himself. That night, he slept like the dead.

## CHAPTER 9

Hugo Dunn was a Mack truck among men. Strong and ruthless, he had few passions. His inner being was ruled by a few simple but strong emotions. He was loyal to his employer, Gerald Levine; he loved Marta Pekovik from afar and without reservation; and he hated foreigners of all stripes. So it was without a second's hesitation that, when passing Norm's Feeds that afternoon and seeing Marta's old truck just pulling out, he turned around and followed. No matter how busy his day, he could always arrange to spend some time with Marta. If she was heading home, he could just happen by and maybe share a cup of coffee in her cozy kitchen.

It took him only a couple of minutes to realize that he was not the only one following Marta that afternoon. There was also a small, red sedan tailing her, a woman driving alone. He watched the red car slowly pass the bird house and travel down the road a little way, only to turn around and pass by again. The red car passed him, too. He saw a dark-haired woman at the wheel and made a mental note of her face. She had a distinctive face, foreign—not Mexican, maybe Indian. In Hugo's world, Indians were just as bad as Mexicans. The contradiction that Native Americans weren't foreigners never crossed his mind. Hugo decided to follow the dark-haired driver, and so he, too, turned around and tailed Rhoda back into town. He would rather have been sitting in Marta's kitchen than chasing some woman, but some primitive instinct

made him curious to see what this stranger was all about.

Rhoda drove straight back to the Topeka Motel. Hugo, a couple of hundred yards behind, watched her park her car and go up to her room. He pulled his bulky body out of his car and lumbered into the motel office, where he slipped the desk clerk twenty dollars for access to the register. The greasy clerk was happy to oblige, and answered all of Hugo's questions. In this way Hugo, learned that the mystery woman's name was Rhoda Deerwalker and that she checked in that morning with a Mexican fellow named Julio Guzman, a regular customer, and that she and Guzman took separate rooms.

"Ain't that peculiar?" said the clerk.

Hugo recognized the name Guzman. He knew that Julio worked for Marta, and he had heard Levine mention the name a couple of times. What he didn't know was who this Deerwalker woman was and what she and Julio were up to. He was smart enough to suspect that something fishy was going on and decided to keep an eye on Ms. Deerwalker. He sat in his car listening to country music, waiting to see if this Deerwalker woman might lead him somewhere. He waited until he got tired of waiting and finally called it quits. She was probably in for the night, he told himself. This was a waste of time. With that thought in mind, Hugo left the Topeka and drove north to report his findings. He thought he had done a good job and maybe Levine would tell him so.

Inside the filthy room, Rhoda was thinking about what to do next. Tight budget or not, she hated this dirty little room and refused to pass a single night in its disgusting bed. She was tired and in great need of a shower but not about to set foot into the Topeka's skuzzy bath. Instead, she called Terry Winter and told him her progress thus far. She told her boss that Julio had flown the coop and that she was going to try and arrange a meeting with the local sheriff in the morning.

"The bird house is way out in the sticks," Rhoda told him. "The address is 1175 State Road 706 in the town of Oconee. The house is surrounded by open fields, which means it's going to be a

tough house to watch without being seen. I'm going to see if I can get any help from the locals, but I'm not expecting much. I don't even know if there are any cops in Oconee. I'm sorry about losing Julio, but you told me not to arrest him."

"Don't worry about Julio," Terry said, "He's history. If he tries to fly back to Costa Rica, we can pick him up at the airport. If he slips past us, he has to worry about the Costa Rican authorities. Either way, he's screwed. Besides, the CITES people are rolling up his whole network."

"Still," said Rhoda, "I hate to think of that slimeball running around making trouble."

"Relax, Rhoda," Terry told her. "Tomorrow's the 4th of July. Everything's going to be shut down. I suggest you take the day off. Think about your next move. Call again when you have something. Good luck."

"Oh Terry, one more thing. I'm checking out of this dump. I can't stay here. I'll call you again when I find a cleaner place."

Having brought Terry Winter up to speed, Rhoda gathered her belongings, packed her bag, and left the Topeka Motel two minutes after Hugo gave up his vigil. She drove into town and found a more appealing place to stay.

Hugo's report to Levine didn't go quite the way he'd imagined it would. He drove his Lexus up to Levine's estate and opened the big iron gates by entering the code on the keypad. Levine's place was a sprawling Tudor mansion on seven-plus acres of carefully tended lawn. Formerly owned by one of Milwaukee's beer barons, it stood in the most upscale part of town. Hugo found Levine practicing his putting in the backyard. A half dozen balls around the cup attested to his lack of skill. Hugo told him of his chance encounter with Marta and then of seeing Marta's car being followed and how he followed them both. Finally, he related how the mystery woman went back to her motel, where he learned her identity.

"Rhoda Deerwalker?" Levine said. "Can't say the name

rings a bell. I'll ask around. Sounds Indian, though. Did she look Indian to you?" He missed another putt and muttered to himself. "So tell me, Hugo, after following this mystery woman to the motel, you found out her name and left? Is that what you did?"

Hugo, so proud of himself a minute earlier, now stammered, "Well, yeah, Boss; I mean, no, Boss. I waited around for almost an hour, but she didn't come out, so I figured she was there for the night. So I left and came here to tell you. Oh yeah, I almost forgot, I found out she checked in with that bird guy. You know the one we get the Mexicans from."

Levine stopped in mid-putt and looked hard at Hugo for the first time. "You mean Julio Guzman?"

"Yeah, that's the guy. They told me he checked in with her. She got her own room, though."

"Well now, that's very interesting. Julio Guzman and some broad. What's that little spic up to?" Levine put away his putter and struck a thoughtful pose. "I'll tell you what you're going to do, Hugo. Tomorrow, at the crack of dawn, you're going to go back to that fleabag motel and you're going to keep an eye on this Deer-walker person. See where she goes, who she meets—give me a full report. In fact, take Artie with you, some fieldwork'll do him good. He needs to get out of the house, and two eyes are better than one." Artie was Levine's younger brother, apprentice, and live-in bookkeeper. A gangling bookish accountant, he was thirty-six years old, unmarried, and suffering under the tyranny of his older brother.

Hugo didn't think much of the idea of taking Artie with him, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He couldn't see how Artie could be much help, but he knew better than to voice his opinions out loud. What he did say was "OK, you're the boss."

Early the next morning, Hugo and Artie drove over to the Topeka Motel. Right away Hugo could see he had a problem; the little red rental car wasn't there.

"Which is her car, Hugo?" asked Artie.

"It ain't here. She's probably at breakfast."

“So what do we do?”

“We wait until she comes back.”

“What if she don’t come back? What then?”

“Shut up, Artie. Why don’t you go get us some coffee?”

“Yeah, sure. How about I ask the desk clerk if she checked out while I’m doing that?”

Hugo gave Artie an icy stare, “Just get the coffee, Artie.”

“Maybe she checked out last night, is all I’m saying. Maybe we should check.”

Artie’s suggestion, logical though it was, fell on deaf ears. Truth be told, Hugo thought it was a good idea, but didn’t want to credit Artie with any leadership ability. What Hugo said was, “Who made you boss? We’ll sit here until I say different.”

Across town, Rhoda was having breakfast in the coffee shop of the Albert Hotel, where she was now staying. The Albert was once one of Milwaukee’s grand hotels. Today, it was tired and old, retaining only the shell of its elegant past. It had a splendid lobby and marble floors, but the furniture was patched and the Persian carpet threadbare. However, the rates were low, and the rooms were clean. It was a great improvement from the Topeka.

Rhoda learned from the Internet that Oconee did have a police force, tiny though it was. She had their phone number in her cell phone. Earlier, in her room, she tried calling but the recording machine said the office was closed for the holiday and suggested she call 911 or the state police if it was an emergency. Just for the hell of it, she turned on her receiver/recorder. There wasn’t much chance that Julio had kept the transmitter on his person but it was worth a try. She only heard static. Either Julio was out of range or, more likely, he had thrown the thing away.

After breakfast, Rhoda tried calling the Oconee Police Department again and again got the answering machine. She didn’t leave a message. She decided to explore Milwaukee and enjoy her day off. Across town, Hugo and Artie sat in the parking lot of the Topeka Motel and roasted.

Out of desperation, Paco joined three equally poor and hungry youths in a mugging. They jumped an old man in a park, took his watch and wallet, and beat a hasty retreat before the police arrived on the scene. The crime netted Paco the equivalent of \$15.00, but the act sickened him. He was ashamed of his actions. He was not raised to be a thief. The money eased his hunger and improved his immediate condition, but it did nothing to improve his long-range prospects. He didn't have nearly enough to pay the coyote, a hired professional, to get him across the border, and he didn't have enough knowledge to know where the safe crossing points might be. It was at just this low point in his journey that he heard about the train.

The train was referred to as El Desperado, the desperate one, by the would-be immigrants. It was a freight train that made its run north through Juarez into the heart of the U.S. The terminal in Juarez was heavily guarded with fences and patrols. But a mile or so out of town, when the train had picked up speed, a man could, with luck, strength, and agility, run alongside, grab a boxcar ladder, and swing himself aboard.

Nighttime was the best time to make the attempt, but darkness also compounded the danger. Many a young man was crushed beneath the wheels or crippled because of a misstep. Many made it on board only to be apprehended on the other side by the border patrol or the railroad bulls. The trick was to leave the train early, before it slowed too much. If you waited until the jump was easy, it was too late.

Once off the train, the danger was not over. There were still miles of desert to cross and vigilantes and hostile local police to avoid. Vigilante groups and the ever-present border patrol kept the pressure on. All of this security extended for many miles inland, and all the agencies kept a close watch on the train. Still, in Paco's situation, the train provided the best opportunity for his dash over the border and so he husbanded his meager resources and made his plans.

## CHAPTER 10

While Rhoda Deerwalker was exploring downtown Milwaukee, Bill O'Halleran was preparing for the Fourth of July. For the residents of Oconee, the Fourth meant either participating in or watching the town parade. As police chief, Bill had no choice but to participate. The town's police cars and fire trucks were an essential part of the parade. For Bill, it was a full day of obligations, first the parade, then the big law enforcement picnic at Ben Greer's house, and finally the town fireworks display at Findlay Park.

Bill, in his best uniform, sat in the front passenger seat of a bright red Lincoln convertible. Rita was at the wheel, and Harvey and Cantress occupied the back seat. The two women were wearing sunglasses and sundresses. Harvey, newly released from the hospital and looking shaky and weak, was wearing his uniform, his arm in a sling. Cantress fussed over him. She thought he should be in bed recovering, but Harvey had told her that he had never missed a Fourth of July parade and he wasn't ready to start now.

The parade was led by the mayor in his convertible, who was followed by the high school marching band, the ambulance, the fire trucks, a couple of floats from the scouts and the Future Farmers of America, the Precision Ride-on Mower Drill Team, the Rotarians, the police cruisers driven by volunteers, and the occasional politician running for office. The route, about a mile in all, went from the middle school parking lot, where the parade assem-



bled, down Main Street and up Union Street to the old high school, where it ended. The route was lined with flag-waving families, many of them farmers and their children from neighboring communities and towns without parades of their own.

Bill sat in the passenger seat beside Rita, smiling and waving at the crowd. Harvey, still recuperating from his wound, sat with Cantress in the back, waving with his one good arm. As the car inched along in the line of march, Bill was surprised at the increase in enthusiasm as they passed by. He understood the crowd's animation when he saw the banner stretched across Main Street. It read "Oconee honors its hero, Harvey Brent." On Main Street, where the crowd was thickest, the cheering was deafening. Bill felt proud of Oconee for remembering Harvey, and Harvey, face red with embarrassment, grinned like an idiot.

After the parade, Bill went back to the office, ostensibly to check messages and faxes, but in reality, for lack of anything better to do. It was still a couple of hours until the Greer cookout. There was nothing of interest on his desk, but Bill welcomed the quiet of the empty office. He put his feet up on his desk, leaned back, and napped.

He was roused after an hour or so by the telephone. A groggy hello from Bill was answered with: a cheerful "Chief O'Halleran, please."

"Speaking."

"Chief, I'm so glad I found you in. I just took a chance calling on a holiday."

"I just stopped in for a minute. Guess you got lucky. What can I do for you Mrs.—"

"Miss ... er ... Miz. Deerwalker. Rhoda Deerwalker. I'm a special agent for the Fish and Wildlife Service Enforcement Division."

"That's quite a mouthful," said Bill. "What can I do for you, Ms. Deerwalker?"

"I'm working a case in your neighborhood, and I just

wanted to give you a heads-up and maybe enlist your help catching some bad guys.”

“I appreciate that, Ms. Deerwalker. I’ll do what I can.”

“Please call me Rhoda.”

“OK, Rhoda, I’m Bill.” Bill was already warming up to the voice on the phone. She sounded nice, friendly, like she could really use his help.

Rhoda said, “I’d like to meet with you at your office or over coffee sometime soon. Are you free this afternoon?”

Bill squelched a wild urge to invite this woman to the cookout. It would have been a gallant gesture, but he restrained himself. As lonesome as he was, it didn’t seem professional to be mixing police work with his private life, at least not without having even laid eyes on her. Instead, he said, “Today’s not looking good. I have to be somewhere in a few minutes. But tomorrow’s fine. We can meet for breakfast, or after if you like. Where are you staying?”

“Breakfast sounds good. I’m in Milwaukee at the Albert Hotel. Where’s a good pancake in this part of the world?”

“I’ll meet you at the Dairyland Diner. It’s halfway. Best breakfast in Wisconsin. Take the interstate south to exit 46. You can’t miss it. Ten o’clock sound good?”

“Ten a.m. I’ll see you there.”

Well, this was an unexpected bright spot in an otherwise dismal day. Something to look forward to. Breakfast with a young woman. Already, Bill’s head was filling with fantasies. He laughed out loud at his response but there was no denying it, the prospect cheered him considerably.

Later that afternoon, Bill drove out to Greer’s house for the annual law enforcement cookout. Ben Greer had been hosting this shindig for at least ten years, and it seemed to get bigger every year. Greer invited all of the local cops and sheriffs in his three-county territory. Those with wives and children brought them along. Last year, 150 people drank beer and ate burgers on his big lawn under a hot July sun. This year, it looked like even more.

When Bill pulled his cruiser into a space on Greer's suburban street, he thought it must look like the world's largest crime scene, with all the police cars parked up and down the road. Bill considered the gathering to be a busman's holiday. But in the interest of good politics and good fellowship, he plunged into the crowd. Everyone wanted to talk about the shooting and the fire, so Bill was the focus of interest for quite a while.

He found himself just about the only person there in uniform and immediately regretted not changing or at least bringing another shirt. He was hot and sweaty in the sun, so he grabbed a cold beer and looked for a shady place to drink it. As he walked through Greer's front yard, he admired Greer's imposing house and landscaped lawn. There was a new swimming pool in the backyard. There must have been thirty kids splashing around in it. Bill found a table with an umbrella and sat down. He thought Greer was living pretty well. He couldn't imagine how Greer managed to afford such luxury on a state cop's salary. Maybe his wife had money. Bill remembered when this party first started. Greer and his wife, Pam, were living in an old bungalow with a tiny yard, and burgers were cooked on a tiny grill in the carport. Today, Bill could see Greer holding court on his big stone patio, flipping burgers on one of those huge stainless steel grills that cost a few thousand bucks apiece.

After a while, Greer came over and sat down across from Bill with a tired grunt. Greer was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. His shirt was untucked to hide his belly. Greer handed Bill a cold beer and said, "I'm beat. I must have cooked two hundred hamburgers and a thousand hot dogs. I'm getting too old for this."

"Well, you'll be retiring soon. What is it, another two, three years?" asked Bill.

"Two more years. I can't wait to get up in the morning and go back to sleep. Did I tell you we got the crime scene reports on your shooting? No surprises. The shooter didn't leave much, or if he did, the fire took care of it. The arson squad thought it was deliberately set, but we already knew that."

Bill asked if there were any prints on the ladder. Greer said, “Nah. Clean. The guy knew what he was doing.” Both men took long pulls on their beers. Greer said, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you about that day. How come Harvey was driving your cruiser?”

“The old one was in the shop again. Why?”

“Well, did you ever think someone might have mistaken Harvey for you?”

“The thought crossed my mind; I just can’t think of why either of us would be a target,” said Bill. “You have any ideas on the subject?”

“None. Care for a cigar?” Greer handed Bill a cheroot. Bill unwrapped it. Greer tossed a pack of matches on the table. Bill lit up and looked at the matchbook. It said “Dell’s Inn” in black lettering on a gold foil background, exactly like the matchbook he found in the bag of clothes. Bill handed back the matches and asked, “You know this place?”

“I took the wife there for dinner last week. Had a good meal. A bit pricey. I wouldn’t recommend your going there.” Greer gave Bill a knowing look and walked away.

Paco fell in with six companions and together they gathered their courage and resolved to catch the “desperado.” They huddled near the tracks and waited for nightfall. As they waited, they supported each other, giving voice to their dreams of the life that awaited them, but in the silences that seem to get longer and deeper, each man harbored private fears.

The train announced its approach with light and noise. It was a raging beast, and it was moving fast. The six young men in the ditch tensed. In a moment, the train was upon them. It was moving much faster than they had imagined it would. They climbed up the embankment and sprinted alongside the rail cars. The train was a thundering, rolling wall of steel. The gravel and ties under their feet were ready to trip the careless and send them to their death. They ran alongside and grabbed for the passing

ladders. Paco leaped and grabbed an iron rung as high as he could reach; and in an arm-wrenching tug that swept him off the ground, he pulled himself on board. He looked back to see two of his companions left behind. He crouched on a small platform between the cars, shaking and winded. The train picked up more speed and roared away into the night. In an hour or two, he would leap again into the darkness, and he hoped he wouldn't break his neck. After all this suffering, his journey was just beginning.

Paco rode through the night. The rhythmic swaying of the car lulled him into a fitful sleep. He could see his companions lying next to him sound asleep. He knew instinctively that to sleep now was to be caught by the border police. He fought against the temptation to close his eyes. Outside it was pitch black but dawn was close at hand. He muttered a prayer to his guardian spirits and jumped into the unknown.

That evening, Bill told his birds about the day's events: the town honoring Harvey, the strange warning from Greer, and the phone call from Rhoda Deerwalker, the Fish & Wildlife cop. "I'm meeting her in the morning," Bill announced to the audience. The birds twittered, and Bill said, "Well she sounds nice, but I have no idea what she's like. I'll tell you tomorrow."

## CHAPTER 11

Rhoda entered the Dairyland Diner and looked around for Bill. The place was hopping. She scanned the dining room for a police uniform. A hostess asked her if she wanted a table. "I'm meeting someone here," she said. "All right if I take look around and see if he's here?"

"Sure, honey. Help yourself." The hostess turned to the couple in line behind her. Rhoda looked around the crowded dining room and spotted a man in uniform sitting alone in a corner booth. She liked the look of him immediately. For his part, Bill was watching the entrance, and when Rhoda approached the hostess, his heart leaped. He thought she was the most attractive woman he'd ever seen. He stood up as she walked over; both seemed slightly embarrassed by the attraction. They shook hands, introduced themselves, and sat opposite each other. A waitress brought them menus and coffee.

Bill said, "I was getting worried we'd never find each other; this place is so busy. I hope you're hungry; you're in for some serious breakfast."

Rhoda said, "Good, I'm starving. Breakfast is my favorite meal."

"That's good," said Bill. "You know what they say about breakfast."

“No. What do they say?”

Bill blushed and replied gamely, “They say it’s the most important meal of the day. You know, the foundation.”

They both laughed at the pretentiousness of that statement and the artificiality of the whole conversation. But the ice was broken, and they began to feel comfortable with each other. A waitress came over, but they hadn’t even looked at the menus, so she just refilled their cups. They took a few minutes to decide on their orders. When the waitress returned, Rhoda ordered eggs over easy, grits, sausage patties, and a side of buttermilk pancakes. Bill ordered the same but asked for a couple of biscuits. He said, “The biscuits are not to be missed.”

Their meals arrived on two huge platters, each the picture of breakfastly perfection. The waitress refilled their cups and delivered a pitcher of real maple syrup. Rhoda and Bill dug in with gusto, both thinking the similar thoughts: I like a man/woman with a good appetite. The only sounds for the next few minutes were grunts of pleasure and praise for the perfection of the biscuits, the sausage, the pancakes, and the eggs. When the last bite was eaten, Rhoda sat back, heaved a contented sigh, and began to tell her story.

“There’s a house in the country not far from Oconee that is part of a large, well-organized bird smuggling ring.” She told him everything she knew, which, considering she hadn’t known Bill for more than half an hour, could be considered either reckless or trusting. But she did trust this man, and she trusted her instincts. Bill listened, and nodded, and let Rhoda speak. He admired her earnestness and sincerity, but as hard as he tried to be professional, his mind kept registering her beauty along with the facts of her case. He was just musing that she seemed to be younger than him by about ten years, and that she wore no wedding ring, when she mentioned Julio and how he supplied the bird house with illegal aliens. Bill snapped to attention. He told her about the Hispanic hitchhiker he found a few months back—how rare Hispanics were in rural Wisconsin. He wondered out loud if their cases might be

connected.

“That would be a remarkable coincidence,” said Rhoda.

“Well, anyway, consider the Oconee police department at your service. I’m sure we can help you in lots of ways.”

“That’s great to hear, Bill. I don’t expect to be much of a bother, but I’m glad to know you’re there if I need you.”

They finished the last of their coffee and sat in contented silence for several minutes. Finally, Rhoda said, “You know, maybe we can help each other. I mean it’s only fair if you’re helping me that I help you with your case. Even if they’re not connected, is there something I can do?”

Bill told her about the matchbook he found in the bag of clothes and about his desire to go to Dell’s Inn and see what he might see. “It’s a fancy restaurant about twenty minutes from here. Maybe you could come with me; that way I wouldn’t feel so self-conscious. A couple would look more natural than one guy eating alone.”

Rhoda wasn’t so sure about the connection between a soggy pack of matches and a dead hitchhiker, but could see no downside in having dinner with this man. She looked at him and smiled, “Are you asking me out, Chief O’Halleran?”

“Ah, no. I mean sort of. Think of it as an undercover assignment. Strictly professional. Well, you offered,” Bill stammered.

Rhoda laughed and said she’d love to go. “At the very least, I’ll have a good meal and a break from my surveillance.”

“Good, it’s a date. I mean a deal,” Bill laughed, relieved.

“I just thought of something,” said Rhoda “I don’t have anything to wear. Nothing suitable for a fancy restaurant. I have jeans, shorts, and this outfit I’m wearing now.”

“I still have some of my ex-wife’s things at my place,” offered Bill impulsively. “She was about your size.”

Rhoda gave him a quizzical look. Bill shrugged and said, “Probably not a great idea. I know, how about you borrow something from Rita, our dispatcher? She’s a good sport and about your



height. We should go over to the office now, anyway. It would be good to look at some county maps and see if we can locate your bird house on them.”

Bill signaled for the check. Rhoda excused herself and headed for the ladies room. In the diner parking lot, Bill suggested that Rhoda follow him back to his office. It was a short ride to Oconee through rural farmland dotted with dairy cows and red barns. When they arrived, Bill introduced Rhoda to Rita. The two women immediately fell into a deep conversation about shoes and dresses. Bill went upstairs to the county clerk’s office to borrow some detailed maps. He brought them back downstairs and dumped them on his desk. Eventually, he got the women’s attention back to criminal matters.

Bill pointed out State Road 706, and Rhoda located where she thought the bird house was. Bill pointed to a farm nearby and asked Rita, “Isn’t that the Maples’ place right there?”

As dispatcher, Rita had pretty well memorized most of Oconee’s real estate. “That’s the Maples’ place alright,” she confirmed.

“See here,” said Bill pointing to a spot on the map. “The Maples’ farm backs up to the bird house. I bet there’s a tree line separating the two properties. It’s going to still be quite a distance to the house but with good binoculars ...” Bill explained that the Maples were his deputy’s in-laws, nice people, and that permission and access should be no problem.

Just then, Harvey and Cantress showed up. After greetings and introductions, Bill filled them in on the developments of the morning. Cantress offered to speak with her parents immediately and obtained their full cooperation a few minutes later. Harvey, too, was enthusiastic. Here was some police work that he could do in his wounded condition.

“Count me in,” said Harvey. “If you’ll have me, this is something I can help with.”

Rhoda was overwhelmed by the friendliness and openness of these people she’d just met. She wasn’t used to such warmth from

strangers after only a few minutes in their company. "I'd like to thank you all. I was hoping for some cooperation from the local police but this is above and beyond."

"Well, hell," said Harvey, "this may well be the most exciting thing to happen in Oconee this decade. We're happy to be a part of it." Bill studied his friend's smiling faces; he was happy to be in their company. Then his glance happened on Harvey's wounded side, and he realized how quickly things could turn ugly and how fragile happiness was...

Day breaks quickly in the desert, and the cold night quickly yields to another day's relentless heat. Paco awoke cold and alone. He walked north but kept well away from the tracks. After a few hours, he was soaked with sweat and very thirsty. The desert sun was drying him like a raisin. He'd finished the little water he brought a couple of hours before. He stopped in the shade of a desert tree and rested. Hearing voices, Paco lay flat on his stomach in a feeble effort to hide. Was this the border patrol coming to arrest him? After all that risk, was he only to be in America for a single day? But it wasn't the border patrol; it was a small band of his countrymen, led by a coyote. They found Paco and gave the frightened boy some water. Despite the coyote's protestations, they invited Paco to walk along with them. They shared their water and food and discussed their plans. Everyone urged Paco to stay with them. They were heading to the closer and friendlier cities of the Southwest, where their relatives lived and worked at good paying jobs.

"Come with us, Paco. My cousin has a restaurant in Phoenix. He'll pay you five dollars an hour to wash dishes."

"My uncle has a landscaping business; you can earn good money mowing lawns for gringos."

No one could believe Paco was going to travel another eleven hundred miles to a place called Wisconsin, where he had no family, no friends, and no support. "Man, you're crazy," said one of the men. "You're gonna get caught, and they'll send your ass

back to Juarez. You can't even speak English; how're you gonna live?" And so they parted company. Paco, with no money and almost no English, headed north into America's vast interior.

The route Paco took to Wisconsin was a circuitous one. He walked most of the way. He begged when he had to and worked when he could, but he never again resorted to stealing, and for that he was proud of himself. Often, he was reduced to eating from Dumpsters, and sometimes he slept in them. Some encounters were more charitable than others. There were nights in jail on vagrancy charges, nights in shelters for the homeless, nights in ditches, and after a beating from local toughs, a night in an emergency room. The journey took four months, but against all odds, Paco arrived in Oconee on the Fourth of July. Now, all he had to do was find out what had happened to his brother.

## CHAPTER 12

Before they left the office, Bill asked Rita to check upstairs with the county clerk and see what she could learn about the bird house, especially, who owned the property. Rhoda followed Bill out to the Maples' Farm, where he introduced her to Sam and Martha Maples. They declined the offer of coffee and hiked through the pastures and cornfields to the wooded tree line separating the Maples' fields from the bird house's. They got their first real look at the house. It was a typical white clapboard farmhouse, badly in need of paint. Nothing distinguished it from its neighbors. It was about 150 yards from where they stood concealed in the trees. Bill had thought to bring along some water, a couple of aluminum chairs, and his bird-watching binoculars. Rhoda had a notebook, a small spotting scope mounted on a tripod, and a camera with a telephoto lens. Their vantage point was elevated, and they could see the entire rear yard and most of the driveway.

"This is perfect," said Rhoda. "Better than I'd hoped. I'm glad I called you guys first. My second choice was the state police. I doubt if I'd have gotten such kind attention."

Bill said, "I'm glad you did, too."

Rhoda felt happy to be on the job at last. This was her first case, and she relished every moment. There was nothing going on outside the house at that particular moment, but so far things were

falling into place very nicely. Bill made sure that Rhoda was all settled in before he excused himself. He still had his job to do. He reminded Rhoda that Harvey and Cantress would be by in a couple of hours to relieve her. He told her to call Rita if she needed to get in touch with him and received a big warm smile in return. It made him wish he didn't have to leave.

After a couple of hours, Harvey and Cantress made their way through the field to give Rhoda a break. They directed her to Oconee's one cafe, where she could have a sandwich and a cup of coffee. She instructed Harvey to watch for any activity and to note the time and description in her notebook.

After four hours of watching, Rhoda had a total of three entries in her notebook. She had seen a woman leaving (Marta?), a young Hispanic man throwing garbage in a metal barrel, and another Hispanic male having a smoke in the backyard. She carefully noted the time of each entry. She was hoping to learn the house's rhythms and with luck, to discover who to follow to the next link in the smuggling chain. It was careful, patient, boring police work.

Four days passed in this manner. Harvey, sometimes alone and sometimes accompanied by Cantress, would relieve Rhoda around noon for an hour and then again at around four in the afternoon for another break. On the fifth day, Rhoda's routine was broken by Bill's arrival. He told her, "I have reservations for two at Dell's Inn. Eight o'clock tonight. Rita has clothes for you at the office. It should be a nice break from sandwiches and surveillance. So, if it's all right with you, I'll pick you up at your hotel at around 7:30." Rhoda agreed. She was surprised at how happy she felt. She was pleased to have a distraction from the dull work of surveillance, and an evening with Bill could be fun.

Bill knocked off work at 5:00 and went home to get ready for dinner. He put on his best and only suit, tie, and white shirt. He told his birds that this was strictly a police matter and they should get any thought of romance right out of their heads. The fact that Rhoda Deerwalker was a beautiful woman had absolutely no bear-

ing on the matter. He called the Albert Hotel on his cell phone and alerted Rhoda that he was on his way. She said she would be ready and would meet him in the lobby.

When Bill arrived at the hotel, Rhoda was waiting as promised. He went through the revolving doors, and there she was. She looked fantastic in Rita's red cocktail dress and stiletto heels. Her lustrous black hair was done up in some impossible way that revealed her handsome neck and delicate collarbones. Bill was speechless as they walked to the car. He opened the door for her and was rewarded with one of her smiles.

On the way to the inn, she asked him to explain again how Dell's Inn was connected to his case. He told her again about the matchbook and the hitchhiker and his hope to learn something. He considered telling her about his suspicions involving Ben Greer but thought better of it. Bill wasn't given to gossip, especially regarding a fellow police officer. Instead, he told her how he got into police work through his stint in the military and without very much experience he took this job in Oconee. "I read a lot of crime fiction," Bill declared, as if that was all the training he needed.

Rhoda asked him about the shooting, and Bill confessed that he thought it might be related to his investigation but had no idea how or why. Rhoda listened and wondered if this cop knew what he was getting into. She asked, "If that bullet was meant for you, Bill. What might happen if you investigate further?"

"That's exactly why I have to go," Bill replied. "If I don't investigate, then what kind of cop am I? I don't want to be the kind of cop who lets things slide because they might be dangerous. And I don't suppose you're that kind of cop either."

To a boy like Paco, most of America was exotic and confusing, but the tiny town of Oconee in many ways reminded him of San Miguel. A few blocks of commerce, which included two gas stations, a motel, a grocery, and a cafe, could have been San Miguel's main street if it had been unpaved, the signs had been in Spanish, and there were some chickens in the street. There was a

church, a couple of schools, and a park. The park had a ball field and playground attached. The rest of the town consisted of streets with houses in varying sizes and shapes. Paco found an empty shed on the edge of town and made it his home. He spread out his blanket and went out to look for work.

He got lucky immediately and found a dish washing job at the only restaurant in town, the Oconee Cafe. Phyllis, the owner and manager, was tickled to have an employee she could afford and didn't look too closely at Paco's work history, citizenship, or legal status. For Paco, the job was perfect. He not only got a paying job in Oconee, but Phyllis fed him lunch and allowed him to take home leftover food to eat for his supper. On the long summer evenings and his days off, Paco walked around town looking, not exactly sure what he was looking for. Maybe signs of his brother, maybe another Spanish speaker, maybe a house filled with birds.

## CHAPTER 13

Dells Inn was a rambling, white clapboard, one-story structure with a green awning out front and valet parking. Bill wasn't the kind of person to pay someone to do what he was perfectly capable of doing himself, so he parked his own car and walked with Rhoda to the entrance. A well-dressed maitre d' asked if they had reservations and then said, "This way, please." They followed him through a candlelit dining room heavy with linen and crystal. He led them to a table for two, held the seat for Rhoda, and handed them large leather-bound menus. The prices gave Bill a moment's pause, but he recovered his poise and said, "What are you in the mood for?"

Rhoda whispered, "Bill, are you sure you want to do this?"

Bill smiled and said, "Not to worry. Tomorrow, I'll go to the bank and get a second mortgage."

After a few minutes, a waiter approached and introduced himself. He told them about the evening's specials and asked for their drink order. "Just water," Bill and Rhoda said simultaneously.

The waiter brought water and a breadbasket. He took their dinner order—trout for Rhoda, pork chops for Bill. Impulsively, Bill added, "And two glasses of wine, white for the lady and red



for me.” The waiter nodded, took away the menus, and left.

When the wine came, Bill lifted his glass and offered a toast, “To success in our investigations.”

Rhoda clinked her glass to his and said, “Your investigations are a lot more glamorous than mine.”

Bill asked her how the surveillance was going. She told him that things were getting a little bit clearer. There were three young Hispanic men who did the work of feeding and cleaning up, and there was the woman, Marta, who made the deals and picked up and delivered the birds. “My next move is to follow Marta and see where she goes.”

“Let me know if you want me to go along,” said Bill. “It could be tricky. I can watch your back.”

“I may need help, Bill. It all depends on what I find.”

When the food arrived, Bill asked the waiter how long he’d worked at the inn.

“A long time. I worked here since before the fire, before this place was rebuilt. I waited tables at the old Tropicale for ten years. The Tropicale, that was some place. Very Polynesian, ya know what I mean? Tall drinks, parrots in the lobby, the whole works.”

“What happened to the Tropicale?” asked Bill.

“Burned to the ground September 22, 1996.”

“Was anyone hurt?” asked Rhoda.

“No ma’am. It was the middle of the night. The place was closed.”

“How’d the fire start?” asked Bill.

“No one ever figured it out. The state cops said it was an accident, a short circuit or somethin’. It happened right after old man Bartoli sold the place. It was in all the papers. Can I get you folks anything else?”

The food was only so-so, not worth the inflated prices, but the atmosphere was nice. In truth, Bill hardly tasted his chops. He was thinking about what the waiter said. He made a mental note to dig into the story of the old Tropicale and its fiery end. He took out his notebook and wrote down the date so he wouldn’t forget. Rhoda

watched him and asked, “What were you thinking? You think a ten-year-old fire is connected to your hit and run?”

“I have no idea,” said Bill, “but it’s the only piece of information to come out of this dinner. Maybe it’s something, probably not. But that’s enough talking shop. Let’s forget we’re cops for a minute and pretend we’re regular people. Tell me something about yourself.”

“Sure. What would you like to know?”

“Tell me how you wound up working for Fish and Wildlife,” Bill asked.

Rhoda took a sip of her wine and said, “I don’t suppose you ever heard of Spix’s macaw?” Bill replied that he hadn’t. “Macaws are really beautiful birds—brightly colored, related to parrots. They’re distinguished from parrots by their long tails. They’re highly prized by collectors, as they’re intelligent, long-lived, and beautiful to look at. Some of the rarest and most endangered birds are macaws. In fact, of the seventeen remaining macaw species, twelve are in imminent danger of extinction.

“The most endangered and rarest macaw of them all is the Spix’s macaw. According to most wildlife experts, it’s the single rarest bird in the world. There is, at last count, only a single individual Spix left in the wild. There are a dozen or so in zoos and a few in private collections, but in its native habitat, in Brazil, there is only a single lonely individual looking in vain for a mate. Every other Spix had been stolen.

“The pressure on all tropical birds is tremendous. It says something about us as a species that our arrogance, stupidity, and greed would allow us to hunt and remove the last creature of its kind from the wild in order to sell it to some rich asshole. Even though it makes far more sense to leave the creatures alone, let them breed, and have them around for our children to admire, we just continue to hunt them down. It’s a sad world that has no macaws in it. It makes me sad and angry whenever I think about the Spix.” She delivered this last sentence in a fierce whisper, and Bill felt himself moved by her passion.

After a moment's recovery, Rhoda continued, "After I heard the story of the Spix, I wanted to do something. I became a biologist, and then I joined the wildlife service right out of college. Now that I'm in enforcement, I can do something. Maybe actually make a difference."

"That's quite a story," said Bill. "I've got a soft spot for birds myself." He told her about his birds and how he talked to them. Rhoda found his self-deprecating honesty refreshing. She liked a man who knew how to listen and seemed to understand her motivations. She said she'd like to see his birds someday. Their eyes met.

The waiter came to remove the plates. He offered dessert but there were no takers. Bill asked for the check. When they got into the car, Rhoda leaned over and kissed Bill full on the mouth.

"Just to prevent any awkward moments later, I like to get the goodnight kiss out of the way early. Thanks for a lovely evening."

They drove home in silence, the radio playing softly. Bill drove past Rhoda's Milwaukee exit and continued south to Oconee. They entered his trailer and kissed again, this time accompanied by the joyful singing of a dozen birds.

## CHAPTER 14

The next morning, Bill arrived at the office late. He had to drive Rhoda back to her hotel so she could change her clothes and retrieve her car. Bill felt a little sheepish walking into the office with Rita's little red dress over his arm and her high heels in his hand. "Rhoda says thanks a million."

"Nice evening?" Rita asked.

"Beautiful," Bill said blushing slightly.

Rita told Bill that she had been researching the bird house property. "It's owned by a PLG Corporation. I can't find squat on them; they're not a Wisconsin corporation, but I have a call in to the secretary of state's office to see if they have anything on them." "Thanks Rita, that's good work. Since you're so good at this, I have another research job for you."

"I live to serve," said Rita, giving a mock salute.

Bill asked Rita to "look into news reports on the Tropicale restaurant fire in September of '96. See what the Milwaukee papers had to say about it, would you?" Rita made a few notes and handed Bill his messages and faxes. Another day of policing Oconee, Wisconsin, had begun.

In the woods behind the bird house, Rhoda kept her vigil. This was the sixth day of her surveillance. She was learning the house's rhythms and gaining familiarity with its residents. Yesterday, Marta took delivery of a large shipment of birds. Rhoda

had photos and the license numbers for her file. On this morning, she watched a black Lexus pull into the yard. An enormous man got out and went into the house. He stayed about an hour and left. Rhoda made a note of it in her logbook. A couple of hours later, Harvey came by and gave her an hour's break for lunch. She drove into town for a sandwich at the Oconee Cafe.

What Rhoda had witnessed was Hugo arriving for the weekly cash pickup. It was Hugo's favorite time of the week, sitting in Marta's kitchen drinking a cup of coffee. He liked the color and noise of the birds; he liked being in Marta's company. Her flirting with Mexicans was something he could live without, but all things considered, life wasn't too bad for Hugo Dunn. He made his rounds and picked up his envelopes. His intimidating presence alone was enough to keep Levine's partners honest. When there was some actual enforcement work to do, it was a welcome diversion.

Marta found the big man amusing and lorded her power over him. She enjoyed toying with his emotions, how a simple bat of an eye or a swish of her hips could set the giant into a smoldering dangerous rage. It drove Hugo crazy. It was their little game. Every now and then, it erupted into bloody violence but mostly it was just a sick form of entertainment. On this day, as Hugo was having his coffee, one of the Mexican boys tapped on the door and handed Marta something. Marta ran a long fingernail down the boy's cheek and continued the caress down his shirt, all the way to his crotch, and said, "Thanks, Pepe." Hugo clenched his fist around his cup. He pretended it was a Mexican neck he was crushing. When his coffee was finished, Hugo collected the week's receipts, gave Marta a peck on the cheek, and left.

Marta was rinsing out the cups when her cell phone rang. It was a highly agitated Julio Guzman calling.

"Julio, I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. You have those black palms for me already?"

“No Marta. No birds this time. I got other things on my mind. The feds, they’re on to me.”

“How do you know they’re on to you?”

“Because they sent an agent to follow me from Miami. I gave her the slip, but I’m afraid to go back home.” Marta heard the note of hysteria in Julio’s voice.

Julio had been holed up in a fleabag Milwaukee hotel room ever since splitting the Topeka. He had been brooding on his situation, and none of his options looked promising. He had the cash from the last deal with Marta, so he was not in any immediate financial peril, but his long-range prospects looked bleak. He was afraid to travel back to Costa Rica, and even if he managed to get there, his network was either in hiding or in jail. What a mess. He figured he had only one chance to make a big score. It was risky, but the way he saw it, he hadn’t much to lose.

“Tell your boss it’s going to cost him a hundred grand to keep me quiet. That’s how much I want, I need, a hundred grand you got that? I know enough about your little operation to make you a lot of trouble. I can’t go home, you understand? So I gotta do what I gotta do. My business is fucked. What am I gonna live on? I need money, and you gotta pay. I’m sorry, Marta. You’ve always been good to me, but I got no choice.”

Marta was shocked. Julio had no idea who he was messing with. Marta wasn’t sure what to do, but she liked Julio and tried to warn him. She said, “Look, Julio, the people I work for, they’re not going to like being blackmailed. They will get angry. They could hurt you.”

This elicited a stream of profanities from Julio in several languages, culminating with, “I don’t give a fuck. They don’t pay me, I go to the cops. I ain’t negotiatin’ here.”

“OK, Julio. Just stay calm, OK? We’ll work something out. I don’t have that kind of money just lying around. I need to speak with my people. I’ll get back to you, all right? How can I reach you?”

“You can’t; I’ll call you. You got three hours. I’ll call you at

six.”

Marta hung up the phone and immediately dialed Hugo Dunn, “I need to tell him something by six,” Marta said. “Either pay him or don’t, but it’s your problem now.”

Hugo absorbed this information with no visible reaction. He drove over to Levine’s to deliver the news in person. He found Levine on his deck in his hot tub listening to music on an iPod. Levine took off his headphones and said, “You’re back early. Give the money to Artie. Get into your trunks and have a soak.”

“No thanks, Boss. We got us a situation.” He gave Levine a rundown on Julio’s demands and finished with the question, “How you want to handle it?”

Levine looked at Hugo and nodded, “There’s only one way to handle something like this, Hugo. You can’t let the little people walk all over you. Why what would happen to our business if we let every little prick screw us? No, no, my friend, it is precisely for situations like these that we have a man like you. You’ll have to be there at the payoff and make sure our old friend Julio gets what he deserves. Oh, and be sure to get a receipt. You will get a receipt, won’t you Hugo?”

“Sure boss, I’ll get a receipt. How about his head?”

“Let’s not be excessive. I think an ear will do nicely.” With that, Levine submerged himself in the bubbling water.

Hugo called Marta and told her to set up the meet. “Tell him we’re gonna pay him this once but never again. Tell him we’ll give him the hundred grand, but if he tries anything like this again, we’ll kill him.”

At six o’clock, Julio called. “It’s me,; you got my money?”

“I’ll have it. You’re one lucky man. They agreed to pay you, but just this once. If you try to shake them down again, they’ll kill you.”

“You tell ’em not to worry. I get my money, you never see me again.”

“That’s smart, very smart. So tell me where to meet you.”

“Tomorrow morning at nine. Be on the corner of Stanley

and Tenth in Milwaukee. Come alone and bring the dough.”

Stanley and Tenth was a nondescript corner in a shabby working class neighborhood, a blighted piece of real estate in a decaying part of town ripe for urban renewal. On the corners were a pool hall, a laundry, a grocery, and a boarded-up storefront covered with graffiti. Julio stood inside the grocery drinking coffee from a paper cup. He scanned the street, waiting for Marta to arrive.

At nine sharp he watched Marta’s old pickup pull into a parking space across the street. She was alone. He made himself wait a few extra minutes to see if anyone was following. No one was. The street was empty of cars and pedestrians. Julio walked across the street. Marta was standing outside the truck, leaning on the fender and smoking. He startled her. “Hey, Marta, you got my money?”

“I told you I’d have it,” Marta tossed her cigarette into the street. “It’s in the truck under my seat. You want me to get it for you?”

“No, stay there, I’ll get it.” Julio walked around the truck to the driver’s side and pulled the door open. As he bent down to look under the seat he was knocked senseless by a blow to the back of his head. With surprising agility for so big a man, Hugo had leaped from the truck bed, punched Julio in the back of his head, and pushed him, dazed and bleeding, into the truck. Hugo got behind the wheel, Marta jumped in the truck bed, and they pulled away. The snatch took less than two minutes.

Hugo drove the semi-conscious Julio south. Every time the man groaned and stirred, Hugo slammed him back into unconsciousness. They drove deep into the country, eventually turning off the highway into the state forest. Hugo found his way onto a gravel road, which turned into a rutted dirt trail after a mile or two. When he found a clearing, Hugo pulled over. The forest was still. There was no one around for miles. He gave Julio a couple more punches and walked around to the passenger side. He slung Julio over his shoulder like an old carpet, picked up a shovel from the truck bed, and walked into the woods without a word. Marta got



into the truck and turned on the radio. She listened to a jazz station until Hugo came back sweating and alone.

Bill got back to the office at his usual time. Rita greeted him with the news, “I’ve been researching the fire at the Tropicale. Want to hear what I learned?”

“Sure. Fire away.”

“The Tropicale was a fairly popular restaurant. It catered to tourists mostly. It burned to the ground in the middle of the night in 1996. The fire was deemed suspicious by the local fire inspector so the state arson squad was called in. The state investigator determined that the fire was caused by an electrical short. The case was closed and the insurance paid. The only interesting thing I could find was that the arson squad investigator assigned to the case was none other than our own Ben Greer.”

“Now, that’s interesting,” said Bill. “Did you find out who collected the insurance money?”

“That kind of information isn’t available online,” said Rita, “but I have a call in to the town clerk in Talon. That’s the town where the restaurant is located. I expect to hear back from her at any moment.” Like magic, the phone rang, “Oconee Police Department, Rita speaking. Oh hi, Dolores. Great, you have the information. How do you spell that? That’s great, Dolores, thanks a million. Goodbye.”

Rita handed a slip of paper to Bill. Bill read that the insurance company paid a half-million-dollar settlement to a Mr. Gerald Levine, president of the PLG Corporation.

“Seem like a lot of insurance for a dumpy restaurant.”

“Some people have all the luck,” said Rita. “I know, you don’t have to ask me, I’ll see what I can find out about Mr. Gerald Levine.”

Bill smiled and said, “Good job, Rita, and thanks. You can save it until tomorrow. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Bill remembered the blurred writing on the soggy matchbook—“i-n-e.” could it have been Levine that was written there?

## CHAPTER 15

So far, Paco's stay in Oconee had not produced any information about his missing brother, Victor. He did learn his way around town and was generally considered a harmless, hardworking newcomer by the residents. The work at the cafe and the regular meals gave his exhausted body and mind a chance to heal. His English was improving, and he had begun to speak with Phyllis, his only friend. After a week or two, he had enough command of the language to ask her if she had ever seen Victor Alvarez. He took out a dirty photograph of a handsome youth standing in the sun with a soccer ball under his arm. Phyllis squinted at the photo for a long time before handing it back to Paco with a shake of her head. She was ashamed to say that all Mexicans looked alike to her, and while there were a few around, they seldom came into the cafe. Paco took this news in stride and went back to work.

A few days later, Paco was standing at the sink when a Mexican boy about his age came into the cafe and asked Phyllis for change for the pay phone. Paco went out the kitchen door and around to the front of the cafe. The Mexican kid was crossing the street to the pay phone when Paco called to him in Spanish "Hey, you, wait up a second." The Mexican kid, also an illegal, took one look at Paco and took off running. Paco ran after him and tackled him a couple of blocks away. They rolled in the dirt, panting and

sweating. Paco gasped, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. I only want to ask you a question."

"I thought you were Immigration."

"No, I'm just like you. You're the first countryman I've seen in days."

"There aren't many of us in this town," said the boy.

"What's your name? I'm Paco." Paco held out his hand. The boy took it, and Paco pulled him to his feet. "I'm Roberto, they call me Tino."

Paco asked, "Have you been here long?"

Tino shrugged, "Maybe eight months."

"Why don't you come back with me? I'll buy you a beer. It feels good to speak Spanish again."

Tino accepted, and they walked back to the cafe as friends.

Paco and Tino sat at a table sipping their beers. It was four o'clock, and the place was empty. Phyllis was in the kitchen planning menus with the cook, Jim. After talking about home for a while, Paco told Tino he was looking for his brother. Paco laid the photo before him and said, "Victor Alvarez. He worked around here; did you know him?" Tino's face fell at the mention of Victor's name. When he saw the photo, his eyes filled with tears.

"You know him," Paco said. "Can you tell me where he is? I've come here to find him."

"I don't think you will find him," said Tino. "I knew him; we worked together. He was here before me. A nice guy, your brother. We were friends. One day, he disappeared."

The story, at least what Paco could piece together of it, had to be pulled from a reluctant Tino in halting sentences. He adamantly refused to reveal any details about the nature of the business or its location, and Paco sensed that this was out of fear.

The story was that Victor, Tino, and another boy, Louis, all lived and worked somewhere maybe a mile or two from the cafe. The owner of the business, a woman, had a thing for young boys. The boys didn't like her much, but they were young and bored and well, you know...Even though, they all agreed, the woman was old

and ugly.

Victor was her favorite, and spent more time with her than the others. The trouble was the woman's boyfriend, a giant of a man, jealous and mean. He caught Victor messing around, beat him viciously, threw him into his car, and drove away. Tino said he hoped that Victor had run away and was working somewhere. He was afraid of the big man. He was afraid he'd disappear too. It was all he was willing to say.

Victor thanked him for the information. He begged to know the location of the house where Tino worked, but the boy stubbornly refused to say. Still, Paco felt he had made progress. He didn't know if his brother was alive or dead, but at least he knew that someone in this town might know: The big jealous man and the woman who sleeps with young boys, they knew. All he had to do now was to find them and ask.

## CHAPTER 16

Rita ate at the Oconee Cafe a couple times a week, usually when she got sick of her own cooking. Oconee didn't offer much in the way of dining choices. There was the cafe in town or the steakhouse out on the highway, and that was about it. Anyone interested in serious dining headed into Milwaukee, where there were restaurants galore. Rita, however, liked small-town cafes, and she liked shooting the breeze with Phyllis. Mostly, they talked about the sorry state of American manhood, their ex-husbands, and how the world conspires to keep intelligent, independent women in underpaid menial jobs. So, it was inevitable that Rita would see Paco washing dishes and busing tables. She'd seen him, too, on his aimless rambles around town when he wandered past her apartment. Rita had seen him twice now and wondered what the boy was looking for.

She was sitting at the lunch counter eating a chicken salad sandwich when she asked Phyllis about the boy.

"That's Paco," said Phyllis sitting on a stool beside Rita. "He wandered in here a couple of weeks ago skinny and hungry as a stray dog. You know, I've always had a soft spot for strays, so I took him in and gave him a job washing up. He's real quiet. A good worker, though. He doesn't speak much English. From what I can make out, he's looking for someone. His brother, I think; he's look-

ing for his brother who used to work around here. Something about birds, I couldn't quite make it out. I only had a year of Spanish, and that was in high school."

The mention of birds got Rita's attention. She didn't mention anything to Phyllis about Bill's investigation, but she made a mental note to tell Bill at the first opportunity.

A couple of hours later, she did just that. "There's this Spanish kid washing dishes down at the cafe. Doesn't speak much English, but he told Phyllis he's looking for his brother who used to work around here taking care of birds. He said his brother disappeared recently."

Harvey came in and overheard the tail end of what Rita had just said. He had her go over it again. "You know, that kid is most likely undocumented," said Harvey. "If you go over there to interview him dressed like a cop, he'll clam up so fast you'll never get anything out of him."

"Good point, Harve," said Bill. "Besides, I know maybe three words in Spanish, so it wouldn't be much of an interview, anyhow. Who do we know speaks Spanish?."

"Cantress spent three weeks in Spain before we were married," Harvey said, "Maybe she can get his story."

"I don't like dragging civilians into police business," said Bill.

"How about Rhoda?" suggested Rita "maybe she speaks Mexican."

"I'll ask her," said Bill reaching for his cell phone. "I wouldn't be surprised if that woman could speak Chinese."

Rhoda, it turned out, spoke Spanish fluently; she studied the language in college and lived in Mexico for a while. She was excited about interviewing Paco and hearing his story. She speculated to Bill, "Wouldn't it be something if your dead hitchhiker turns out to be Paco's missing brother? Do you have a photograph of the hitchhiker? Of course you must. Loan me a copy and I'll bring it to the interview and ask the kid to give it a look."

Bill pulled a photograph of the dead hitchhiker out of the file and handed it over to Rhoda. It was a morgue shot. The kid's face was badly bruised but you could still see he was a handsome fellow.

"If this kid turns out to be involved with my smugglers," said Rhoda, "there's a good chance that this is more than a simple hit and run."

"You're talking murder, aren't you?" Bill felt his pulse rate increase as he considered the implications of that possibility. Finally he said, "I always thought that kid was a bird lover."

Gerald Levine was working on his tan. He was lying on his stomach in some kind of ultraviolet contraption; dark glasses protected his eyes and his pasty body was bathed in an eerie light. His wraparound sunglasses gave him a vaguely reptilian look. He was trying to read the local paper when Artie called to him. "Someone to see you, Ger."

"Who?"

"Ben Greer."

Greer scoped out Levine's big indoor pool and felt a pang of envy. No matter how much money he made from his association with Levine, he'd never be able to afford anything like this. He fixed himself a drink and made himself comfortable.

"I thought we agreed you were never to come here."

Greer sipped his drink, put his feet on an upholstered chair, and said, "You agreed, Gerry. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important."

"Oh, and what's so important?"

"Trouble, Gerry; we got trouble. The feds are sniffing around the bird operation. Remember that woman Hugo followed to the motel? A Rhoda Deerwalker? Well, I did some checking on her through the police computer. Turns out she's an investigator with the Fish and Wildlife Service. That slime ball Julio must have ratted you out. Anyway, I ran a trace on her and found she's registered at the Alfred Hotel here in town. I got her room number and every-

thing.”

Levine was sitting up now and paying attention. He said, “So what do you think she’s up to?”

Greer said, “Julio couldn’t have given her too much to go on. If she’s following procedure, she’s probably got the bird house under surveillance. And since she didn’t ask for any help from the state cops, my guess is she’s probably working with the locals. I know the local cop in Oconee, a clown named O’Halleran. He’s an incompetent cop wannabe. Not too bright. I’ve already warned him off the case a couple of times. I had to get nasty after he found that bag of clothes.”

“What clothes are you talking about?” Levine was off the tanner and pacing.

“You remember. A few months ago Hugo beat the crap out of that Mexican kid and dumped his body in a ditch.”

“I thought you said that was all taken care of,” said Levine.

“It was. It’s listed as a hit and run. No suspects and no investigation.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“This local yokel cop found the kid’s clothes and re-opened the case.”

“Why were the clothes left at the scene in the first place? I thought you removed any trace of the kid’s identity.”

“Who knew your gorilla was going to toss a bag of clothes along with the body? But don’t worry, I took care of everything.”

“That’s exactly what I am worried about. When you say you took care of everything, what exactly do you mean?”

“I’m pretty sure I scared off the local yokel.”

“Scared him off how, exactly?” asked Levine starting to get angry.

“I took a shot at him. I hit the wrong guy but I’m sure he got the message,” said Greer with a chuckle.

“Jesus Christ, Greer. That was you who shot that deputy? Who told you to go and pull a stupid stunt like that?” Levine was angry now. “You’re supposed to come to me if there are problems.”



Greer jumped to his feet and snapped back “I don’t need your permission to protect my interests. I said I took care of it. This federal investigator crap is a lot more serious; what do we do about her?”

“All right, all right, let’s calm down. This yelling at each other doesn’t solve anything.” Levine walked over to the bar and mixed himself a drink. “The question now is how much the cops know. And how we can stop them from messing everything up. You got any ideas, Greer?”

Greer sipped his scotch, “No, you’re the fucking idea man.”

Levine walked to the edge of the pool and jumped in, swam a lap, and climbed out. He dried himself with a towel from a heated rack. Then he sat next to Greer and said, “Here’s what we’ll do. You visit your friend the cop, what’s his name, O’Halloran? See how much he knows and try to get him to back off.”

“What if he won’t listen?” asked Greer.

“Try bribery, threats, blackmail, I don’t know; use your imagination. If nothing works, you’ll have to deal with it, but for God’s sake, use you head. Make it look like an accident.”

“What about the Deerwalker woman?”

“She’ll have to disappear,” said Levine, as calmly as if he were talking about the weather.

“They’re bound to miss her. They’ll send people to find out what happened.”

“By that time, we’ll have shut down the operation. Bird smuggling will be the least of their problems. They’ll be busy looking for their agent.” Levine eased himself back down on the chaise. “Nobody has any evidence to tie us to anything. So relax. Get this local cop off our necks. I’ll take care of the girl.”

When Greer left, Levine called, “Artie, get Hugo over here; I have a job for him.”

Rhoda drove to the cafe to interview Paco. She found him in the kitchen, washing pots and pans. She greeted Phyllis and asked her permission to speak with him. Phyllis called Paco over

and introduced him to Rhoda. Phyllis said, “This lady has a few questions for you. But don’t worry; she’s not interested in your immigration status.”

Paco’s poor English guaranteed that he would misunderstand what Phyllis had just said. The one word he heard loud and clear was “immigration,” and that made him tense and nervous. He was frightened and uneasy until he heard Rhoda explain in her calm Spanish, “Don’t worry, Paco, I don’t care anything about your immigration status. I wanted to ask you about your missing brother. I may be able to help you find him. You told Phyllis he was working around here taking care of birds. I’m investigating bird smugglers in town. My only interest is the birds. Whatever you tell me can help my case.”

Paco was suspicious. He wasn’t interested in this woman’s problems with birds. She seemed sincere, but it might be a trap. He looked down at the table and said nothing. Rhoda saw that this approach was getting her nowhere. She said, “Well, maybe I can help you. A few months ago the local cops found the body of a young man in a ditch on the side of the road. They said it was a hit and run. I have a photograph of that body. Would you look at it for me?”

Paco felt torn. He wanted to look at the photograph but was afraid at what he might see. Here could be the answer to the question he had traveled so far to find. He thought of his family back in San Miguel and of his mother who had to know. Paco took a deep breath and said, “Si.”

Rhoda took out the photo Bill had loaned her and slid it face down across the table to Paco. He turned it over, tensed, and burst into tears. Victor was dead. When he regained his composure, he asked, “What do you know about his death?”

“I’m so sorry for you, Paco,” Rhoda reached across the table and took Paco’s hand. “I wish it wasn’t him. The police say he was hit by a car, but no one saw it happen and no one has been charged with the crime. He died of massive trauma. He had no identification, so no one knew who he was. At least, that’s what

the police report said.”

“What do I do now? Where is his body? I must tell my family.” Suddenly, Paco was a bewildered child, and Rhoda provided what comfort she could. She promised she would help him get his brother’s body back to San Miguel, if that was what he wanted. Paco was greatly relieved and thanked Rhoda profusely. He told her, “Gracias. Gracias,” over and over.

Paco was quiet for several minutes while he absorbed this news. After a while he asked Rhoda, “How do you think I can help you?”

“You told Phyllis that your brother worked around here taking care of birds. That was what you said, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that was what I told her.” With very little prompting, Paco told Rhoda everything he knew about Victor’s job in Oconee, his employer, and her jealous boy friend.

This all made perfect sense to Rhoda. She thanked Paco for his cooperation. She sat in her car outside the cafe and called Bill.

“Your hitchhiker’s name is Victor Alvarez, Paco was his younger brother. He worked at the bird house with Marta. He might have been killed by Marta’s jealous boyfriend.”

“You realize what’s going to happen if we tell the state police that we have a relative and a name?” Bill asked her. “The kid will have to deal with the state if he wants to reclaim the body. It’s probably lying in an unmarked grave in some Potter’s Field somewhere. There are going to be interviews and forms and when it’s all over, they’re certain to turn him over to immigration. You realize what that will mean? Once you get the authorities involved, the machinery of government will chew Paco up and spit him back to Mexico. Are you sure that’s what you want to happen? At least, he found his brother, and I guess that’s worth something.”

Rhoda looked through the cafe window. She could still see Paco sitting at the table, his head in his arms. She said to Bill, “Let’s leave the state out of it for a while. These should be his decisions. I’ll explain how the system works and warn him what he’s getting himself into. Let’s give him some time to decide what he

wants to do.”

“Fine with me,” said Bill.

## CHAPTER 17

After another day of surveillance, Rhoda drove her rental car to Milwaukee, grabbed a burger from a drive-through window, and then went straight to her hotel.

It wasn't what she wanted, after that beautiful candlelit meal with tinkling glasses and sparkling silver, but it was what she got. Rhoda was confused about her position in this tiny law enforcement family. It wasn't like her to be either a one-night stand or an object of gossip in a small town, so she kept to herself and tried to concentrate on her duties. She regarded her behavior as impulsive and decided it was probably a mistake. She confided in Rita that she thought Bill was acting distant and she wondered if he really cared about her.

As for Bill, he went home, equally confused, to his frozen dinner and bird-filled trailer. Their night together did a great deal to break through the protective shell he had built around himself since his divorce. With Claire there was always an emotional price to pay for intimacy. He wasn't sure he still had the courage to risk another emotional disaster. While he felt loving and protective toward Rhoda, he couldn't see how anything lasting would ever come of their relationship. So to keep matters from getting even more complicated, and to protect himself, he avoided eye contact, said little, and made an effort to be professional. After a while the silence

itself became the problem.

Bill studied the instructions on his frozen meatloaf as if he might find the key to human happiness there. Finding nothing but the familiar instructions, he popped his Hearty Man dinner into a preheated oven and set his kitchen timer for the required twenty-five minutes. He put a little enthusiasm in his voice as he told his birds about the day's events. He could tell they weren't buying it. He was about to launch into a monologue on the complexities of human relations when there was a knocking on his door. It was Ben Greer, standing in a light rain. Bill was surprised to see him. Greer shouldered his way passed Bill, "You talking to yourself, Bill? Jesus, will you look at this place. What are you a zookeeper?" "It's my hobby, and they're company. You're working late, Ben. Come in. Can I get you some coffee? Something stronger?"

"You need to get a life, boy. Scotch if you got it?" Greer pulled a chair over to the table. Bill found a bottle with a couple of inches of whisky in it. He put the bottle and a clean glass on the table in front of Greer, who poured it all into his glass. He knocked it back and fixed Bill with a hard look.

"I'll get right to the point. I hear you've been playing detective and poking your Boy Scout nose into matters that don't concern you."

Bill returned Greer's look and waited for the man to continue. Greer was in civilian clothes but wore his service revolver under his arm.

"You got any more booze?"

Bill shook his head no.

Greer gave Bill a sneer and said, "I'm talking about this bird business. The state cops are on to it. You're mucking up an ongoing investigation. You're way out of your depth here. I can't blame you for being curious, but this snooping around has got to stop. The state's been working this case for months. We have people undercover; I'm telling you to back off now before you screw things up and someone gets hurt."

"Now just a minute, Ben; this is my town, my jurisdiction. If the state police were doing an investigation here, why wasn't I

notified? That's correct procedure. Hell, it's the right thing to do. What ever happened to professional courtesy?" A now-angry Bill pointed an accusing finger at Greer and continued, "And as far as being out of my depth, who found the bag of clothes that you missed? Who I.D.'d the hitchhiker? It wasn't you or your super cop buddies at state police headquarters. And one more thing, Detective, if you guys were investigating a bird smuggling ring, how come no one told the Fish & Wildlife people?" As he said this, Bill's voice rose in volume until, at the end of his speech, he was red faced and shouting. He didn't trust Ben Greer and suspected that Greer's story of a police investigation was a pack of lies.

Greer shouted back, "Professional courtesy? Who are you kidding? Your little two-bit operation is about as professional as the Keystone Cops. What makes you think I'd tell you anything?"

"At least I'm an honest Keystone Cop," responded Bill.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" snarled Greer.

"It means I didn't cover up a murder, commit arson, falsify reports, lose evidence, and sell my self-respect to the highest bidder. I'm not sure exactly what you're into, Greer, but I'll bet internal affairs will be plenty interested in what I have to say."

At the mention of internal affairs, Greer's demeanor changed abruptly. He leaped to his feet shouting, "Why you stink-in' son of a bitch." He picked up the chair he had just been sitting on and smashed it down on Bill's head, knocking him senseless. A dazed and bloody Bill crawled toward the coat rack, where his service revolver was hanging. Greer brought the chair down on him a second time, and Bill's lights went out just as his oven timer rang.

Bill came to in his kitchen, arms and legs taped to a chair. Greer was moving around the room, looking through drawers and muttering to himself. "Bill. Bill. If only you'd minded your own business. How many warnings do you need? You brought this on yourself, you know. Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Now you're going to have a most unfortunate accident. I learned a lot of useful stuff in the arson squad. Twenty years trampin' around in burnt-out ruins gives a man an appreciation for fire's finer

points.

“Take your average arsonist, for example. He makes a lot of mistakes, leaves a lot of incriminating evidence behind. You gotta know what’s traceable and what isn’t. Take that tape you’re tied with. Most amateurs use duct tape. That’s a big no-no. Too much adhesive residue. Very easy to trace. The arson squad finds duct tape residue and they know they’re dealing with a homicide. Always use electrical tape. No adhesives—it just melts away.

“Another common mistake amateurs make is using accelerants, stuff like paint thinner or gasoline. Very traceable stuff. Real pros use propane or natural gas. The problem with gas is, of course, ignition. How to get that initial spark to set off the explosion while you’re miles away having cocktails with your girlfriend. Now, I don’t want to sound boastful, Billy boy, but I have solved that little problem in a most elegant way. Now pay attention, Bill; you just might learn something.”

While delivering this speech, Greer was busy preparing his timing device. Bill struggled with his bonds to no avail. He watched Greer take a light bulb and carefully break the glass without breaking the filament. All the while, Greer kept up a running commentary as if he were delivering a seminar on how to blow up a trailer. He screwed the modified bulb into a table lamp and carefully propped a couple of wooden matches against the filament. Then, he plugged the lamp into a timer, set the timer for forty minutes, and plugged the timer into an electrical outlet.

“There you go, Bill, you see what I’ve done? Genius, no? All materials obtained on site. No messy chemicals. No telltale evidence. Folks’ll say it was a real pity about that gas leak. It’s going to be a spectacular explosion. You’ll go out in a blaze of glory. I suspect you’ll get your picture in the paper. I’d love to stay and see it, but, unfortunately, I’ll be home having dinner with my family; but there you have the crux of the matter, Billy boy—family. If you had one, you’d understand. A man has to provide for his family. And sometimes that means making compromises and sacrifices. A man has to make sacrifices for his family. And in this case, I’m



afraid, you're the sacrifice. Ha! Get it, Bill? I'm sacrificing you to save my family, ha ha."

Greer adjusted the burners on the stove so there was gas but no flame. Before leaving, he helped himself to a bite of Bill's meatloaf. "Not bad for frozen food. What a pathetic life you lead. You're probably not going to miss it that much." Then, Greer wiped his mouth on Bill's curtains, pushed Bill's chair over backwards, and gave him a few good kicks before leaving.

It didn't take much time for the trailer to fill with gas. One by one, Bill heard the tiny thumps as his birds fell from their perches.

In Milwaukee, Hugo piloted his black Lexus through the dark streets until he found a parking space a couple of blocks from the Albert Hotel. He checked his watch; it was 9:15. He strode purposefully into the hotel's lobby and went directly to the bank of elevators. Only three people were in the lobby at that hour, and only one of them paid any attention to the big man waiting for the elevator. When the elevator arrived, Hugo pushed the button for the sixth floor. The man in the lobby watched the indicator stop on six and put down his magazine.

When the elevator reached the sixth floor, Hugo walked down the long hallway to room 603. Thanks to Greer's inside information, Hugo knew exactly where to go. He knocked on the door and waited for Rhoda to answer. Rhoda had just finished showering. She was in her pajamas, a towel wrapped turban style around her head. "Who is it?" she called.

In the lobby, the hotel security officer, Vincent DeSalvo, had watched the giant man take the elevator to the sixth floor. A retired Milwaukee policeman with nineteen years service, twice wounded on the job, DeSalvo limped over to the check-in desk and asked Jerome, the night manager, "Did you see that big guy get in the elevator a minute ago?" Jerome said he did.

"Is that guy a guest here?" DeSalvo asked.

"He didn't check in on my watch, and I haven't seen him

around. He'd be a hard one to miss."

"Who is it?" called Rhoda.

"Hotel security," replied Hugo.

There was no peephole in the door, so Rhoda slipped on the security chain and opened the door a crack. She recognized the big man from her surveillance and quickly slammed the door shut. Her gun was in the dresser drawer half a room away. She dove in that direction. Behind her the door exploded inward, the doorjamb splintered, and pieces of wood and security chain flew into the room.

Rhoda made it as far as the dresser; but before she could open the drawer, Hugo had his massive arms around her. He flung her across the room like an old towel. She crashed into the lamp that separated the beds. The lamp shattered, and the table overturned. Rhoda screamed for help and looked for something she could use as a weapon. Nothing useful presented itself. She picked up the telephone and slammed it into Hugo's head. Hugo hardly noticed the blow as he bent down, picked Rhoda up, and tossed her on the bed. She screamed again as loud as she could, but the scream was cut short by Hugo's hand clamped like a steel collar around her throat. With his tremendous strength, Hugo squeezed, and Rhoda's struggles quickly become feeble; her vision darkened, and she knew she was going to die.

Vincent De Salvo arrived on the sixth floor in time to hear Rhoda's screams and the crash of the broken lamp. He limped down the corridor as fast as his bum leg would allow. He took out the only weapons he carried—a small can of mace and a pair of brass knuckles. He entered room 603 in time to see the giant man squeezing the life out of one of the hotel's guests. In an instant, his instincts took over and he yelled in his best cop's voice, "Stop. Police. Let her go or I'll shoot."

Hugo turned to see an elderly man pointing a spray can at him. With a growl, Hugo let go of Rhoda's throat and started toward the new threat. Vincent squirted the mace into Hugo's

face, blinding him. Hugo cried out in pain and grabbed Vincent in a fierce bear hug that crushed his ribs and squeezed the breath from his lungs. Vincent flailed away at Hugo's head with his brass knuckles, cutting him in a dozen places. The pain and blood only enraged Hugo even more, and in one brutal motion, he threw Vincent violently into the wall. Vincent slid down the wall like a bloodstain. There was no fight left in him. Hugo moved in for the kill, intending to crush Vincent's head and neck with his foot. Hugo paused when he heard the unmistakable sound of a nine-milimeter pistol chambering a round. The first of six bullets, fired in rapid succession, entered his body. The big man turned to see Rhoda, pistol in hand. He gave her a crooked smile and fell dead. The attack was over.

Rhoda called 911 for an ambulance and the police. She did what she could for Vincent until they arrived. The medics took Vincent to the hospital and Hugo to the morgue. Rhoda was bruised and beaten, and her throat hurt when she spoke. Her voice was now only a throaty whisper. She declined a ride to the hospital but accepted a foam collar from the medics.

She insisted on staying until the crime scene detectives arrived. Then, she slowly and painfully gave them her statement. The hotel management, embarrassed by the entire episode, upgraded Rhoda's room and offered to let her stay as long as she liked, free of charge. It was past midnight before she could get to bed, but sleep seemed out of the question. She was hurting, adrenaline kept her heart racing, and she was worried about Bill. If this gorilla could find her so easily, he must have been able to find Bill. She dialed Bill's number every fifteen minutes, but all she heard was his phone ringing over and over.

Bill, dazed and delirious, thought he heard a phone ring as he lay, taped to the kitchen chair Greer had tipped over on the floor of his trailer. Greer had just kicked him twice in the ribs and left him to die in a gas explosion. Bill struggled with his bonds. They did not yield. He could manage to rock back and forth and

roll from side to side, but that accomplished nothing. He called out for help, but the trailer door was closed and no one heard him. His thrashing about did have one positive result, it managed to knock over the lamp which, in turn, dislodged the matches and broke the filament. This may have removed the immediate danger of explosion, but Bill knew that the gas would kill him long before the explosion, anyway. The smell of gas in the trailer was very strong. Bill could feel his consciousness slipping away. He had no strength left to struggle. He lay still. He felt very tired and strangely peaceful. Maybe Greer was right; maybe he wouldn't miss this life. He'd miss his birds, he thought, and he'd miss Rhoda. The last thing he saw before his eyes closed was the ugly face of Sylvia Stoddard a few inches from his. Then, he passed out.

When Bill came to, twenty minutes later, he was in his front yard, still on his back and still taped to his kitchen chair. His head ached something fierce, but he was breathing clean air and he was alive. From his awkward position, he could just make out the figure of Gus Stoddard standing over him grinning, a large bread knife in his hand.

"Well, Chief, I guess you owe me one," he said. "You're plum lucky Sylvia needed some butter or something. Else you'd be as dead as those little birdies of yours." And with that, he sliced the electrical tape holding Bill to the chair.

Bill struggled to get up. He was still woozy. He shook Gus Stoddard's hand and asked, "Did you turn off the gas?"

"Yep. Sure did," said Gus. "I turned it off from the outside right after I drug you outta there. How you feeling, Chief?"

"I'll be all right," Bill told him. "I owe you one, Gus. Thanks."

"You better let the place air out," said Gus. "Too bad about your birds."

"Yeah, too bad," said Bill. It really was too bad.

## CHAPTER 18

Frantic thoughts tumbled around in Bill's aching head. Fighting the aftereffects of the gas, he struggled to think while driving as fast as he dared. Somehow, their cover had been blown. There was no telling how much that maniac Greer knew. Bill couldn't believe how close Greer came to killing him. Rhoda must certainly be a target, too. Maybe Greer was heading there next. He should have alerted someone in the state police about his suspicions. But whom in that organization could he trust? Greer was one of their own, and they'd rally to his side. What was he thinking, playing detective? This wasn't one of his novels; this was real life with real bad guys who played for keeps. Greer was right; he was in over his head. He'd almost gotten himself killed, and now he was worried Rhoda might already be dead. He pushed redial on his cell phone for the thirtieth time and heard the phone ring in an empty room.

Bill pulled up to the Albert Hotel in time to see an ambulance pull away. The street was awash with flashing lights. His heart sank. He was sure he was too late.

He raced into the lobby and showed his badge to the first cop he saw. "What's going on?"

"There's been a shooting," the cop said. "I'm not at liberty to give out any information. If you want details, speak to the

captain.”

Instead of looking for the captain, Bill went up to the reception desk and asked Jerome, the night manager, if he could fill him in. Jerome was in a high state of excitement. He told Bill what he knew. “One man shot dead, two people hurt—a man and a woman. Quite a night.”

“I’m looking for a woman; she’s staying here, Rhoda Deerwalker. Do you know the name?”

“That’s the lady who got hurt. She’s still here. We moved her to another room, compliments of the management. I’m not supposed to give out room numbers, but I can ring her and see if she’ll see you. You a friend of hers?”

“I’m a close friend” He showed Jerome his badge and asked, “Look Jerome, I just broke the land speed record getting here. Be a good guy and let me see her.”

“I guess it can’t hurt none seeing as how you’re a cop and all.”

The Rhoda Deerwalker that opened the door to Bill looked a lot different from the woman he had seen that morning. She was wearing a neck brace, her eyes were bruised and swollen, and there was sticking plaster on several cuts. She fell into Bill’s arms, and for a moment, they just stood there, savoring the relief of finding the other alive. After a few moments of grateful silence, they sat together on the bed and told each other their stories.

Rhoda was traumatized; her story came out in a raspy whisper. “Oh, Bill, I killed a man. I shot him—six times. It was so horrible. I don’t think I’m cut out to be a cop. I never thought I’d ever have to shoot anyone. That security man, he saved my life, and then I saved his. The man I killed, Hugo Dunn, he almost killed me. I really thought I was going to die.”

Bill did his best to comfort her. He said things like “There, there” and “It’s all over now” and “You had no choice; he would have killed you both.”

Bill poured her a glass of water and let Rhoda come to terms with what she’d done. She sobbed softly, and Bill rubbed her

back and shoulders. She finally calmed down and really looked at Bill for the first time since he arrived. She saw that he had dried blood in his hair and he looked like he'd been in a brawl. "My God, Bill. Here I've been babbling on about myself. What happened to you? I've been calling you all night."

"I had a visit from my old friend and mentor Detective Greer." He gave her an edited version of his evening's adventure and his miraculous rescue by his nutty neighbors. "I swear I'll never say another bad word about the Stoddards. The only fatalities ..." Bill choked up remembering how his birds died. "... were my birds. I came right over as soon as I could. I was afraid he'd get you too," he concluded. He spoke in a thick voice that failed to hide his emotions, although he struggled to keep the tears below the surface.

Rhoda reached for Bill, then, and kissed him. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you," she said. Bill kissed her back. And then he kissed her again.

Eventually, their naked bodies revealed the cuts and bruises of their violent encounters. Bill kissed every cut and scrape on Rhoda's body. Rhoda alternately groaned with pleasure and winced in pain every time her head moved. She was forced to wear the stiff foam collar but felt foolish and unsexy with it on. Bill's ribs were a mass of bruises from Greer's parting kicks, and he had cut his head when his chair fell over. Their lovemaking was punctuated with cries of "ouch" and "I'm sorry" as they struggled to touch each other without causing pain. "We're like two porcupines mating," grinned Bill. "Hot and willing and very careful."

## CHAPTER 19

The phone jarred Bill and Rhoda out of their exhausted sleep. Bill groped for the handset and heard the desk clerk announce their 7:30 wake-up call. He staggered from the bed to the bathroom. Rhoda watched him go and felt the morning's first pang of longing, followed immediately by a sharp pain in her neck and throat. Yesterday's events came rushing in on her, and she knew that she had to act quickly before the death of Hugo Dunn became widely known and the bird house was abandoned.

When Bill called Rita and to tell her he'd be gone most of the day, she asked, "Did you see this morning's paper? There was a shooting last night at the Albert Hotel. Isn't that where Rhoda's staying?"

"That's part of the reason I'll be out today. Rhoda was attacked last night." He hesitated about telling Rita about Greer's attack on him. He still wasn't sure what he was going to do, and he didn't want to alarm her. "She's okay. A little bruised is all.

Rhoda signaled to Bill and in a horse whisper asked him to have Harvey keep an eye on the bird house until she got there. Rita said, "Will do."

Next, Bill called the state police and got the number for the Inter-



nal Affairs Division. The IAD for the Wisconsin State Police was located in a small office suite in Madison, the state capitol, a two-hour drive north. Bill called the IAD number and was connected with a Lieutenant Davidson. "Lieutenant Davidson, this is Chief O'Halleran of the Oconee PD. I need to set up a meeting with you as soon as possible. I need to file a complaint against one of your officers. Detective Ben Greer tried to kill me last night."

Davidson said, "That's quite a complaint. I'll see you when you get here, Chief. In the meantime I'll pull Greer's file and familiarize myself with his record." Bill thought he could there by eleven.

Rhoda too was making calls. Using her cell phone, she called Terry Winter and left a message on his machine to call her back. She had to report the attack and her lethal response. She also had to act quickly to move on the bird house before the perpetrators had a chance to wind up the operation and kill all their birds. She needed backup, and ordering that would require more authority than she had.

There was only time for a quick cup of coffee and a muffin for breakfast. On their way out of the hotel, Rhoda stopped and asked the clerk, "Is there any news on Vincent DeSalvo's condition?" The clerk stared at her blankly until she added, "The security guard wounded last night?"

"Oh, Vinny. Yeah, he's doing fine. He should be back on the job in a couple of days." He handed Rhoda a copy of the Milwaukee morning paper.

She read the headline to Bill over coffee, "Shoot-out at the Albert Hotel." Below the headline was a photo of a large man on a gurney. A sheet covered his enormous body. The grim photo brought back the reality of the danger they were in. "Maybe I should go with you today," Bill reached for her hand. She gave his hand a squeeze. No, you take care of putting Ben Greer behind bars. I'm not foolish enough to take on the whole bird house myself. I'll get some help; don't worry about me."

Madison is a fair-sized city of two hundred thousand souls. Bill had been there several times and knew his way around. He found the IAD office in an out-of-the-way part of town in a nondescript office building. He walked into Lieutenant Davidson's office a few minutes early and shook the man's hand. He got a weak grip from the fiftyish fat man behind the desk. Bill took a seat.

Lieutenant Davidson began by saying, "When we got off the phone earlier, I pulled Detective Greer's file, and I've had time to study it. Detective Greer has been an exemplary cop for thirty years. He has no complaints, no investigations, and no negative reports from either the public or his fellow officers. In addition, he has four citations for bravery and excellence on the job. It is unique, in my experience, to see such a record in a career officer just two years short of retirement. So I have to warn you, Chief, that unless Detective Greer has had a complete personality change since his last performance review, you're going to have a hard time convincing me that he's a bad cop."

"I've known Ben Greer for ten years," said Bill, looking Davidson in the eye. "I've worked with him, respected, even liked, the man. It is just as hard for me to believe what I'm about to tell you, but I believe—no I know now—that the Detective Greer in your records, the man I've been working with all these years, is not the real thing. The real Ben Greer is deeply involved in various criminal activities, including murder, arson, smuggling, and bribery, to name just a few."

"Maybe we better start at the beginning," Lieutenant Davidson pushed the record button on his tape recorder and leaned back and listened.

Bill began his rambling, rather disjointed tale of suspicions with the small, telltale pieces that had been accumulating ever since the body of the hitchhiker was found. The bundle of clothes, the loss of evidence, the fire at the Tropicale, the shooting of his deputy, and the veiled warnings. Finally, he related the not-so-small piece of the story, the attempt on his life just the previous night. Even as the words left his mouth, Bill could feel that he

wasn't making much of an impression. When he finished, he was tired of talking.

Davidson reached over and turned off the recorder. He said to Bill, "That's quite a story, Chief. You've accused the man of everything except treason. Do you have any evidence, anything concrete to back up your charges?"

This was just what Bill was afraid of. He had no proof; he only knew what he knew. Bill admitted that he didn't have much—a witness to the missing matchbook and a witness who could vouch for the gas-filled trailer but probably couldn't identify Greer. He should be able come up with some fingerprints on things Greer touched last night.

Davidson made a note of Bill's list. "I have to tell you, Chief, this isn't much in the proof department."

"I don't know what kind of proof you expected, Lieutenant. If you wait long enough, you'll have my dead body. Maybe that will convince you he's dirty. He's in to this bird smuggling business up to his neck. If you can't or won't do anything, then I guess I'll have to settle things on my own."

"Now, just hold on a minute. I didn't say we weren't going to do anything," Lieutenant Davidson reached into his desk for some forms. "Of course, we're going to treat this complaint seriously. We—I—fully intend to investigate every one of your allegations. I'm going to write up a complaint form just as soon as we're through here. Then, I'll assign a pair of IAD officers to interview Detective Greer and get his statement. You can rest assured this department will be looking into your charges."

"Reports, interviews, assignments—damn bureaucracy," muttered Bill. "Well, thanks for your time, Lieutenant. I'll expect to hear from you one of these days." He reached over to shake Davidson's outstretched hand, which was, if possible, even limper than before. He muttered to himself the whole ride back to Oconee.

Back in Milwaukee, Rhoda was getting a much different response from her boss, Terry Winter. Winter was genuinely upset to

hear about the attack on Rhoda. In his eighteen years with Fish & Wildlife, he had never lost an agent, and an agent shooting someone was a great rarity.

“Just tell me what you need, Rhoda. The hell with the budget. You need more agents out there, you got ’em.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Terry; the guy’s dead. But I would appreciate a couple of agents to help me raid the bird house and make some arrests.”

Winter agreed that was probably a good idea. “I’ll see what I can scare up. I’ll send a couple of agents your way this afternoon. Please, Rhoda, be careful.”

“The Milwaukee cops are looking into Mr. Dunn’s background. Once they find out who he worked for, we should be able to shut down this bunch for good,” she said. “In the meantime, I’m going back to the bird house as soon as I can get away to see what’s happening. I imagine they’re in a panic, and I don’t want to see any of those birds harmed. As soon as you come up with a couple of warm bodies to give me a hand, have them meet me out at the Maples’ farm.”

Terry asked, “How do you think they found out about you?”

“It beats me,” said Rhoda. “Bill, the local town cop I’ve been working with, thinks they have a crooked state cop in their pocket; maybe he found out about me somehow. I’m glad I didn’t go through the state police initially. The local cops down here have been great.”

Gerald Levine yawned and stretched. He had never slept better; the Deerwalker problem was taken care of. He threw on a robe and stepped out on his patio, breathing in the cool morning air. He sat poolside waiting for his breakfast to be served. His brother, Artie, sat across from him drinking a cup of decaf. A small-screen TV was tuned to the local news, and the local newspaper was folded on the table beside him. Levine poured himself a cup of coffee, stopping in mid-pour to listen to what the news

anchor was saying. “And to recap today’s top story. A shooting in a Milwaukee hotel leaves one man dead and two people hospitalized. The dead man has been identified as Milwaukee resident, Hugo Dunn. The names of the two injured parties have not been released.”

Grabbing up the newspaper, Levine saw that the shooting of Hugo Dunn was the top story there too. The newspaper story added more details. His earlier feeling of contentment was dissipating rapidly. The paper said that Hugo was shot multiple times, his body taken to the city morgue. A man and a woman were injured in the attack. The woman, a federal officer, was treated at the scene for bruises and contusions, and the man, a security guard at the hotel, was admitted to St. Boniface Hospital with minor injuries. The next line almost made Levine choke on his coffee. The article said that the police were looking into Mr. Dunn’s private life in an effort to find his employer and discover a possible motive for the attack.

“What’s the matter, Ger?” asked Artie. “You don’t look so good.”

Levine ignored his brother and went to the phone. He called Marta at the bird house and gave her instructions.

In his big suburban house in the country, Ben Greer dressed for another day of rural policing. It was Wednesday, and that meant Menomah County. He tried to spend at least one day a week in each of the three counties on his beat. He liked Menomah Wednesdays. The county was totally rural, nothing ever happened there, and he got to drink beer and play hearts with the county sheriff until it was time to go home.

Greer was pleased with himself. Since hooking up with Gerald Levine ten years ago, his prospects for a financially sound retirement had taken a turn for the better. By becoming a partner in the bird business, Greer had assured himself a supplemental six-figure income. The proceeds from the LPG Corporation (Levine, Pekovic, & Greer) had financed his fine home, paid for his chil-

dren's private school education, and allowed him and Mrs. Greer to dream about a retirement filled with travel and comfort.

Sure, bird smuggling was technically illegal, but no one got hurt (except that Mexican kid, and he had taken care of that little problem), and the whole business was below the law enforcement radar. At least, that was the situation before the Oconee PD and the Fish and Wildlife people got involved. Greer had to smile to himself as he slipped into his freshly pressed uniform; he thought he had handled the matter of the troublesome cop very well. Now that he had eliminated the major threat to his well-being by engineering Bill O'Halleran's tragic accident, he felt peaceful for the first time in weeks.

Marta was in a frenzy. Levine had told, "Get rid of the goddamn birds any way you can. Give them away, let them loose, cook them and eat them; I don't give a damn. Just get them, the Mexicans, and yourself out of there, pronto. We'll set up operations somewhere else. In the meantime, I want you to rent a truck. Pack up what you can and hole up at a motel somewhere, preferably out of the county; make sure you're out of there by tonight and get rid of the goddamn birds."

Marta ran out to rent a truck. She told the Mexicans, "Get rid of the birds. I don't care how. Just make sure they're all gone by the time I get back with the truck."

The boys were shocked at the news. The one thing they liked about their job was the birds. These were, after all, intelligent, loving creatures; many had been nursed back from the brink of death through their love and care. And even though most of the birds were only in residence for a few weeks, a strong bond of affection existed between animal and keeper. One reason these birds were so popular in the first place was that they strongly bonded with their keepers and demonstrated genuine affection for them. Their keepers responded in kind.

Many birds could speak their keeper's names or repeat phrases in Spanish. Killing them was not an option the boys cared

to pursue. Instead, they decide to let the birds go free. This solution appealed to them, even though it was only short term. There wasn't much chance of a parrot surviving a Wisconsin winter. Fortunately for the birds, it was July, and the outside temperature was a tropical ninety degrees. One by one, the Mexicans took the birds outside, wished them well, and tossed them into the air. The birds, many outside for the first time in their lives, flapped awkwardly into the nearest tree or lit on the farmhouse roof and stayed there, bewildered.

At the police station in Oconee, Rita was doing her best to keep things together. She was answering phones and faxes, dispatching Harvey to one small calamity or another, and doing research on Gerald Levine. When she Googled his name, she got a million hits. So she narrowed the search to Gerald Levine, Milwaukee, and got a three-year-old-newspaper article titled "Prominent Businessman Buys Budweiser Mansion." The article informed her that the shy and reclusive millionaire businessman, Gerald R. Levine, had purchased the former Busch estate, Glen View, for an undisclosed sum. The large house and accompanying acreage were valued at more than six million dollars. The source of Mr. Levine's wealth was not known, but he was on record as owning controlling interests in several restaurants, including Dell's Inn in Talon and the Round About in Sacham, Wisconsin.

"Gotcha," said Rita out loud. She printed out the article, highlighted the part about the restaurants, and called information for the phone number. The number was unlisted, so she asked to speak to a phone company supervisor and explained that her request was a police matter. A few minutes later, she wrote Levine's address and phone number on the article.

Bill called from the road. "Hi Rita, I'm on my way back home, I've been in Madison all morning."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine. I need you to call the district attorney in Milwaukee and make an appointment for me for this afternoon. I should be

there around three.”

“OK, sure. I’ll call you back to confirm. Oh, I found a bunch of stuff on our friend Gerald Levine. Guess who owns Dell’s Inn?”

“That’s great, Rita. I’ll look at that stuff when I get back. Have you seen or heard from Rhoda?”

“Yes. She called and said she was finished with her paperwork and was heading to the Maples’. You sure you’re OK?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for holding the fort. Stay there until I get back.”

Ben Greer listened with anticipation to the local news as he drove south on Highway 7. He was disappointed there was no mention of an explosion in Oconee or the passing of the town’s police chief. On a hunch, he dialed Bill’s home number and almost swerved off the road when Bill’s answering machine picked up. That answering machine was supposed to have been blown into a million pieces, but there was O’Halloran’s idiot voice asking him to leave a message. Something had gone wrong. Greer’s previously sunny mood vanished in an instant. He decided to skip Menomah County, turned around, and drove to his office instead.

He needed information and a quiet place to think. If Bill was still alive, he could be causing real trouble in Greer’s life. Did the fool have any evidence? What could he do to deflect his accusations? Greer’s head was swimming; everything he’d acquired was suddenly threatened. What would Bill do? Greer thought of three possibilities: He would probably go to the IAD; he could complain to the district attorney; or he could take matters into his own hands and get revenge. Number three didn’t fit Bill’s personality. As for the IAD and the DA, well, it was Bill’s word against his, and he had his spotless record going for him. Still, there would probably be some sort of investigation. Greer had to think of a way to defend himself against that eventuality. He tried to think of a fourth possibility, but none came to mind. The fourth possibility is always the one that finds a way to bite you in the ass.



Later that day, on his way back to Oconee, Bill stopped in Milwaukee at the state office building. On the third floor, he entered a suite of offices belonging to the district attorney and identified himself to the receptionist. She had him wait a few minutes until a young lawyer in business attire came out, offered her hand, and greeted him.

“Anita Bentley, assistant DA. How can I help you, Sheriff?”

“That’s Chief or Officer. I’m not a sheriff.”

She took him back to her office. Bill said he was hoping to get an arrest warrant against a citizen for a charge of attempted murder.

“That’s a serious charge, Mr. O’Halleran,” Ms. Bentley explained. “To secure a warrant, any warrant, we must first convince a judge that there is probable cause, meaning that there’s a strong presumption of guilt backed up by evidence like a witness, physical evidence, something linking your suspect to the crime. Do you have any evidence?”

Bill thought back to the events of the night before and said, “I have a witness to the crime but no one actually saw the perp. I think I have fingerprints but won’t know for sure until the crime lab gets a look at them.”

“You gather your evidence, Chief,” said Ms. Bentley, “and bring it to me in the form of witnesses and lab reports, and I’ll make your case for you and get your warrants. Until then, there’s not much the DA’s office can do.”

“But I was attacked, almost murdered.”

“Well, you’re a cop; arrest the person who did it. If you haven’t enough evidence to make an arrest, Officer O’Halleran, then I don’t see what we can do. If we can’t make a case, we can’t prosecute. That’s just how the system works.”

Bill drove toward home dispirited and defeated. He couldn’t expect anyone else to solve his problems. He was a fool to think he could rely on the criminal justice system to help him.

Events were moving too fast. Greer wasn't going to sit around while the IAD was taking statements. And the district attorney made it pretty clear that she didn't have anything to go on either. Sure, he could collect a few items that had Greer's fingerprints on them, but what would that prove? Only that Greer had been at the trailer. What was so unusual about that? The trailer didn't explode, he was alive and unharmed, and the Stoddards were too unreliable to use as witnesses, even if they could remember seeing Greer that night. Well, at least he'd gone on record with his complaint. Maybe it would make Greer think twice before trying anything again.

Bill's trailer was dark and silent when he arrived. Instead of the happy twittering that usually greeted him, he found the rotten smell of gas and the sad sight of a dozen dead birds. The little yellow lumps all lay on their backs on the bottoms of their cages. It broke his heart to see them so still. They had been his friends and confidants, helping him through the long lonely years after Claire left. He gathered them up and laid them tenderly in an old shoebox. He found a shovel, dug a hole in a flowerbed, and buried his old friends. Inside, he gathered a few of the items he knew had Greer's fingerprints on them—whisky glass, some tape, a couple of pieces from the bulb. He put them in plastic evidence bags and marked them. Even as he did it, he knew it was a waste of time. The system was not going to stop Greer; he was going to have to confront the man himself and put an end to this madness. The last thing Bill did was to open all the doors and windows in his trailer to air the place out.

It was late afternoon by the time he pulled into the town hall parking lot. Harvey was there hanging out, sitting at his desk and sipping on a soda. Rita, in contrast, was a whirl of energy, answering phones and taking messages. They both froze when Bill walked in. Like everyone else in Central Wisconsin, they had read about the shooting at the Albert Hotel. They were shocked to learn that it was Rhoda who did the shooting. They were even more shocked to hear of Greer's attempt on Bill's life. "Why that lowdown skunk," said Harvey. "We ought to go and

arrest the son of bitch right now.”

“I need to find either witnesses or evidence to tie him to the crime. Otherwise, it’s his word against mine.” Bill told them of his fruitless meetings with internal affairs and the district attorney. He showed them his evidence bags and told Harvey, “We have to go back and take photographs and get statements from the Stoddards. Once the prints are matched with Greer’s, maybe we can get a warrant and make an arrest.”

“And how long do you think that’ll take?” Rita asked.

“It’s anybody’s guess, but it hardly matters, anyway. Greer’s not going to sit around and wait for me to build a case against him.”

“You think he’ll try again?” asked Harvey. “Everyone would know it was him.”

Bill said “He’ll have plenty of time to plan another ‘accident’ or skip the country.”

“So how do we stop him?” asked Harvey.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Bill answered, “and I have an idea. But first, I have to get something to eat or I’ll die of hunger. And if I die, Greer won’t have me to worry about. Come with me to the café, Harve, we’ll get something to eat and talk this out.”

Rhoda watched through her spotting scope as the Mexicans set the parrots free. The sight of all those brightly colored birds in a single tree made her think of a child’s drawing, using every color in the crayon box. The ordinary green of the leaves was punctuated with a gaudy display of blues, reds, and purples. There were parrots on the farmhouse roof as well. They reminded Rhoda of party lights. They made the sad, gray old house look almost festive.

Two sturdy FBI agents on loan from the Milwaukee office waited for Rhoda’s signal. She could hardly fathom the strings that Winter must have pulled to get them here on such short notice, the favors that had to be called in, the promises made. The mountains of red tape that had to be cut through beggared the imagination. But here they were, and she was very grateful. They were waiting

for Marta to return. At the very least, Rhoda wanted to see Marta doing time. In the meantime, they waited and watched as the freed parrots littered the yard like confetti. It was the only spot of comedy in an otherwise serious drama.

After an hour or so, Rhoda watched a Ryder truck pull into the bird house drive. Marta got out of the truck, saw the parrots everywhere, shrugged her shoulders, and headed into the house. Rhoda gave the agents a hand signal, and they all made a dash for the farmhouse. In no time, Marta and the Mexicans were cuffed and Mirandized. Rhoda stayed with the captives while the agents went back for their cars. They loaded up the prisoners and took off them off to a holding cell in Milwaukee. Bill and Harvey pulled into the yard just as Rhoda was getting ready to leave. "I'm so glad to see you guys. I have to help process the arrest. Can you do me a favor and see if you can find some birdseed and pour it around the yard just to keep the birds interested? I'll be back as soon as I can to recapture them."

Bill and Harvey tried to do as Rhoda asked. Bill poured a couple of sacks of seed around the house and tree. Some of the birds showed interest in the food. Harvey suggested trying to help Rhoda out by seeing if they could capture a few of them before she got back. Harvey found a net with a long handle and tried his best to snare a couple of macaws, but catching the parrots proved to be trickier than expected. The two men chased the birds around, looking more like a vaudeville act than a serious attempt at law enforcement. After twenty minutes of running around, they succeeded in catching a total of two birds. They soon grew winded and gave up on their good intentions.

## CHAPTER 20

Detective Greer sat in his office cubicle chewing his thumbnail. On his desk was a phone message asking him to call the DA's office. His stomach twisted into a knot when he thought of calling the DA back. Of course, this could be about something else entirely; Greer had to deal with assistant DAs all the time. But what if Bill had managed to convince one of them to investigate his allegations? He wondered what went wrong at the trailer and cursed himself for being a stupid, arrogant showoff. If only he'd stayed around for the explosion and fire. He wished he could just replay last night. His head filled with visions of a dead and mutilated Bill O'Halleran.

A knock on the cubicle wall snapped Greer back to reality. It was Captain Schultz, Greer's immediate superior. Schultz said, "You got a minute, Ben?"

"I always have time for you, Captain. What's up?"

Captain Schultz took a seat across from Greer and whispered, "This is a little awkward, Ben, so I'll just spit it right out. I just got off the phone with a Lieutenant Davidson. He's with Internal Affairs. I know the guy, a cold fish but a straight shooter. Anyway, it seems there's been a complaint, a rather serious complaint, lodged against you. We're all pretty sure it's all a big mistake, but

you know the IAD, they have to investigate every charge, even the bogus ones; so, the long and short of it is they want to see you in Madison tomorrow. They need to get your side of the story, to give a statement, so they can say they've done their jobs and close the file. That's it. Like I said, I'm sure it's a lot of hooey. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news."

Greer struggled to keep his poise and said, "Did this Davidson give you any specifics? Do you know what this is about?" Schultz said, "Davidson didn't offer any details other than to say it was serious." Greer thanked Schultz, who left him brooding and worried even more than before. Did Bill have any proof? He probably had some fingerprints, but what did that prove? How about witnesses? Unlikely. It was raining and nobody was around. It shouldn't be too hard to talk his way out of last night's fiasco, but what if they probed deeper?

How much did O'Halleran know? Last night Bill mentioned Levine—that was bad. And he said something about IDing the hit and run victim. Everything was unraveling. Oh, how he wanted that pest dead and gone, but killing Bill now would only implicate himself more. All this stress was making Greer sick. He tapped on Schultz's door and told the man, "I think I picked up that summer flu. I'm feeling lousy. I'll see you tomorrow."

"No, you won't. Tomorrow you have to be in Madison giving your side of the story. Go home and lie down. You look terrible."

On the drive home, he could think of nothing but his predicament. How everything had changed in just a few hours. He dialed Levine on his cell. Levine answered, and Greer told him of last night's botched assassination.

"There was no reasoning with the man; I had to get rough. I left him tied up in his ratty little trailer with the gas on and the timer set and ..."

"Jesus Christ, Greer, you're not going to tell me he's still alive, are you?"

"I can't figure out what went wrong, but, yeah, he's alive

and he's telling everyone who'll listen what happened."

"This is bad," said Levine. "This is really bad. First Dunn gets shot and now this. You have any ideas? What are you going to do?"

"I'll tell you what I not going to do, Ger; I'm not going down alone. The cops are going to want to know who me and Dunn were working for. I'm sure I can cut a deal for myself."

"Now just calm down, Ben." said Levine. "Nobody has to make any deals. The cops can't do anything to you if they can't find you."

"What were you driving at?" Greer asked.

"How would you like a nice long all-expenses-paid vacation in sunny South America? Say, Brazil. Yeah, Rio. Perfect, no extradition. So we fly you to Rio; you find a nice place. Send for the wife and retire there. What's wrong with that scenario?"

"I have to think about it," said Greer.

"What's to think about? Go home, pack a suitcase. Get your passport. Kiss your wife and kids goodbye and get on a plane. I'll make the reservations for you. You can come by here and pick up the tickets and some traveling cash. What do you say?"

"I'll let you know after I've thought about it," Greer said and hung up.

Greer thought maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. His mood brightened a little but didn't stay that way for long. How could he trust Levine? Even without Dunn to do his dirty work, it wouldn't be hard for a rich man like Levine to hire someone else. "Come over and pick up the tickets" sounded like a setup. It would certainly take a lot of pressure off Levine if Ben Greer was out of the picture. But what if it wasn't a trap? Maybe running away was the answer. Start over somewhere new. Maybe bring the wife, maybe not. You're never too old to be a fugitive.

When he finally got home, Ida was surprised to see him so early in the day. She asked him if everything was all right. He mumbled something incoherent and went directly to his office and locked the door.

At the Federal Building in Milwaukee, Marta and the Mexicans were in custody. The Fish and Wildlife Service's legal team was drawing up papers and organizing evidence. The evidence against Marta was solid, but she refused to talk about her employer. Any case against Levine depended on her testimony. Even without Levine, Rhoda's quick action was considered a success. She received praise from Terry Winter, his boss, and the top dog at Fish & Wildlife itself, Doctor Peel.

"The press on this is going to be tremendous," Winter told her. Rhoda wasn't thinking about fame and glory, however. She was extremely anxious to get away from the administrative crap. There was a yard full of frightened birds that needed her attention.

As soon as possible, she slipped away from the office and drove back to Oconee. On the way, she stopped at a grocery and bought some fresh fruit. She pulled carefully into the driveway of the farmhouse so as not to alarm the birds. She saw that Bill and Harvey had done as she asked, and there were still plenty of parrots around working on the piles of seeds. Rhoda cut up the fruit and held out pieces of it; at the same time, she pursed her lips and made soft kissing sounds. Fruit was the parrots' preferred food, and they came over to her hand in bunches. She gently stroked them and spoke to them. Then she picked them up one at a time and put them back in their cages. In a little more than an hour, she had secured most of the birds. Some few had flown away, reveling in their freedom, and Rhoda wished the escapees well. Rhoda now had eighty-two parrots re-caged in the farmhouse. She relayed this information to Terry Winter. He told her he would secure homes for them, and in the meantime, he was sending two wildlife officers to Oconee to help Rhoda keep the birds fed and cared for.

Before heading back to Milwaukee, Rhoda stopped at Bill's trailer. The doors and windows were open and a summer breeze had cleared away the last sour vestiges of gas. She let herself in and put three common green parrots into three empty cages. It was a thank-you present she knew he'd appreciate.



Bill and Harvey were having sandwiches at the Oconee Cafe and talking about what to do about Greer. Bill brought Harvey up to date on his busy day.

“Good,” said Harvey. ”Turn the bastard in. Ruin him. I’m sure now it was him who shot me. And for what? To protect his dirty little racket. I guess he didn’t think his police pension was going to be enough. I always wondered how he could afford that fancy new house.”

Bill munched his sandwich for a while before saying, “He’s a desperate man, that’s for sure, but he wasn’t always corrupt. I remember when I was new to the job and he showed me the ropes. We were friends for a while. He’s done a lot of good over the years. The question is what should we do about him now?”

Harvey picked at Bill’s potato chips and said, “Well, one thing is sure, we can’t sit around and wait for him to cook up another ‘accident.’”

“I don’t think there’s too much chance of that happening now.” Bill said, finishing his last bite. “I think Mr. Greer’s criminal career is finished. His professional career, too, for that matter. No, Harve, what I think we should do is to pay Ben Greer a visit. Try and talk some sense into him. Tell him we’re building a case against him. Give him a chance to do the right thing. Turn himself in. Give evidence against this Levine character. He’s a murdering son of a bitch but I think we owe the guy a chance to make things right.”

Greer remained locked in his office at home. Ida came by every fifteen minutes and asked if everything was all right. Greer answered, “I’m fine. I just want to be left alone.” His office was sparsely furnished with a desk and chair, and souvenirs from his decades of policing covering the walls—medals, commendations, and photographs. On the desk were photos of his three children and Ida in happier times. Lying on the desk in front of him was his service revolver. Twice, he had put it to his head and twice, he put

it down again, unable to summon the courage to pull the trigger.

Later that afternoon, Ida knocked on his door and said, “There are two police officers at the front door to see you. I didn’t know whether to invite them in or not.”

He told her he’d be right down. What could this be? Had they come for him already? He looked at his gun again and thought of the peace it could bring. He put it back in the drawer and went downstairs to meet his fate.

Greer was both surprised and relieved to see Bill and Harvey, and not the state police, at the door. He looked at Bill and said, “You have a lot of nerve coming here. What the hell do you want?”

Bill and Harvey were still standing on the front stoop. Bill said, “I thought we might have a word with you before this crazy business went any further. Is there someplace we can talk?”

“We can sit out here on the porch.” Greer motioned them over to some wicker chairs, and they sat down and glared at one another.

Ida came out and offered them all iced tea. Only Harvey accepted. When she brought the glass, Greer told her they wanted privacy. When at last they were alone, Greer’s tough guy facade crumbled, and he looked to Bill like a sad and defeated old man.

Bill looked at him with genuine sympathy and said, “It’s all over, Ben. The feds have busted Marta and closed down the bird house. It’s only a matter of time before they arrest your partner, Levine. The only way I can see for you to keep from spending your retirement behind bars is to offer the government your cooperation, plead guilty, and testify against Levine. It’s the only thing that can help you, Ben. It’s time to do the right thing. If you do this, Ben, Harvey and I won’t press assault charges against you. You’ll probably have to do some time for the smuggling, but it won’t be more than a couple of years. Just so you know, I’ve been to the DA and internal affairs and told them everything. So what do you say, Ben, will you cooperate?”

Greer didn’t say a word. Instead, he put his head down on his arms. Harvey and Bill got up to leave. Bill reached down and

grabbed Greer's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "I'm sure you'll do the right thing," he said.

Tears rolled down Greer's cheeks. He sat frozen with remorse, shamed by Bill's kindness and his own perfidy. Bill and Harvey took their leave. Greer sat there, paralyzed with indecision and shame. Should he add betrayal to his list of sins? Could he stand the humiliation of a public trial? Should he run away? Was he a coward? Could he leave everyone and everything he loved behind and become a fugitive?

Wearily, he brought himself to his feet and climbed the steps to his office. The walls held the record of an honorable career—certificates of merit, awards for valor, promotions and degrees. Where did it all begin to go so wrong? Bird smuggling, that victimless crime? Mistakes. Regrets. He sat at his desk, his eyes fell on the photo of his family in happier days. He took his gun from the drawer, and this time he didn't hesitate. He put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

## CHAPTER 21

It didn't take long for life in Oconee to return to normal. The sensation of Greer's suicide and the notoriety of the bird smuggling racket in their midst soon receded into memory. For a few weeks, it was all anyone in Oconee could talk about over tuna melts and burgers at the cafe. Paco heard the story a thousand times. With his constantly improving English, he learned that the big man who killed his brother was dead, shot by the woman who interviewed him many weeks ago. The woman, Marta, who seduced his brother, was in prison and refused to cooperate with the authorities. And unless she implicated her employer—and gossip had it that he was a rich gangster named Gerald Levine—there was little the law could do.

With Phyllis' help, Paco had learned to read English, and from newspaper articles he learned that Mr. Levine lived on a big estate in Milwaukee and that he had surrounded himself with a pack of expensive lawyers who were defending him against tax evasion charges. Tax evasion was the best the government could do under the circumstances.

After a few more weeks at the cafe, Paco felt it was time for him to move on. He had already made the decision to stay in the country. He had his family's blessings and was proud of the

money he was sending home each month. He had a job offer in Milwaukee and expected to make more money mowing lawns and pruning shrubs. Phyllis was saddened to see Paco leave, but at the same time, she was proud of her friend. She made a small party for him, and was surprised to see how many people turned out to say goodbye.

Bill and Rhoda continued to see each other. Bill was getting used to having a woman in his life again. He began to open up. He noticed he was talking less to his birds and more to Rhoda. It made him happy to see her and he looked forward to their times together. At work Rhoda's fortunes had risen, her good work on the bird case had netted her a big promotion. She was proud of herself and the thought of telling Bill about it filled her with a mixture of fear and apprehension, She was both afraid he would ask her to stay in Oconee and equally afraid he would let her go.

That evening at dinner she took Bill's hand and said, "I got word today that I've been offered a promotion. The head of enforcement for region four up in the northern part of the state. I'm not sure whether I should accept it or not."

"Why that's great news, Rhoda. I'm so proud of you. Of course you should accept. This is what you want isn't it?" Bill refilled their wine glasses and offered a toast. "To the new head of region four. May it be the start of a glorious career."

Rhoda's eyes filled with tears. They touched glasses and sipped their wine. It was an awkward moment in an awkward relationship. Bill thought that this was what Rhoda wanted and Rhoda thought Bill wanted her gone. There was talk about keeping in touch.

"I'll come and visit when you get settled," Bill offered. "We have phones and email. It's not like you're going to be back to Washington".

The next morning Rhoda told Terry Winter she'd be happy to accept the promotion. "There's nothing keeping me here," she said. It looked like the affair was over.

Gerald Levine sat on his patio, speaking into his tiny cell

phone to one of his many lawyers. “I can’t hear a fucking thing you’re saying. Hold on a second, let me close this door.” He was forced inside by the noise of the mowers, blowers, and trimmers all over his yard. He retreated to the quiet interior of the house and slid the big glass door shut. “You can tell the goddamn IRS from me that they can go to hell. If they want to see my tax records from 1999, they’ll have to issue a subpoena. I’m paying you shysters good money to protect me from that kind of harassment. So protect me.”

This conversation and others just like it were defining Levine’s life since the bird house bust. But it’s not so easy to prosecute a rich man in America, and Levine’s battery of legal talent had thrown so many monkey wrenches into the gears of justice that Levine wasn’t worried about seeing the inside of a courtroom any time soon. Marta, on the other hand, had proven to be one tough cookie and was taking her lumps without making any deals. All of the birdhouse illegals had all been deported, and Marta was facing ten to twenty years for violation of the endangered species provision of the CITES convention.

Levine had written off the whole bird business as a business loss and moved on. He had already turned his attention to other, potentially more lucrative, opportunities. He had Artie arrange a meeting with a couple of talented teenage computer hackers who claimed to have developed a foolproof method of identity theft. He’d even started brainstorming with some well-connected associates about growth opportunities in Indian casinos. With so many tempting opportunities around, he wondered why he ever messed around with parrots in the first place.

Bill was responding to a call west of town. A woman in a new subdivision thought she saw a big blue parrot in her backyard. These parrot sightings were becoming increasingly rare as the weather cooled and cats and other predators took their toll on the escapees. Bill and Harvey had managed to catch two escaped birds in the weeks since the big bust. One was a common green parrot

and the other a rare hyacinth macaw. Rhoda found homes for them both. This time, however, the parrot had flown off and Bill was heading home when Rita came on the radio. “Bill, I have a domestic disturbance at the Prairie Moon Trailer Park.” Of course, she just couldn’t resist adding, “It sounds like the Stoddards again.”

Bill told her he’d be there in fifteen minutes. When he got out of the car, he found Gus Stoddard yelling and shooting small round objects, either marbles or pebbles, at his wife, Sylvia, with a slingshot. Sylvia was batting the missiles away with a broom and hurling insults back to her husband at the top of her voice. It was at once a familiar and a comforting scene. Bill knew just what to do. He disarmed Gus and sat him down while he let Sylvia rant awhile. He got them both calmed down and peaceful. He warned Gus about his behavior and sympathized with Sylvia. This was the kind of policing he understood and enjoyed.

The Maples offered Harvey and Cantress a couple of acres of their property and helped them build a house. “You’re going to have a family some day, and we’d love to have our grandchildren close,” they told the couple. By the time the house was ready, Cantress was three months pregnant. When they found out it was twins, half the town brought gifts to the baby shower.

Rita and Phyllis saw more and more of each other, and by the end of the summer, they decided to move in together. The relationship made good economic sense, and their friendship grew until it made other kinds of sense as well. As far as the town was concerned, it was just two working girls sharing expenses. At least, that’s how the community chose to see it.

At the end of every workday, Bill went home to his trailer and talked to his birds. He told them about Rhoda’s promotion and how much he would miss her. He told them about Cantress being pregnant with twins, and he told them about the crazy Stoddards and their tragicomic existence. He often told them how happy he

was to be alive, and likewise, how lucky they all were. The three parrots seem to hang on his every word.

## EPILOGUE

Six months after the bird bust, this article appeared in the Milwaukee Herald:

### City Man Electrocuted in Freak Accident.

The body of city resident, Gerald Levine, was found today floating face down in his hot tub, the apparent victim of electrocution. His brother, Arthur Levine, found Mr. Levine, one of Milwaukee's richest citizens, at 2:30 p.m. yesterday afternoon. Mr. Levine alerted the household and called the emergency squad. Gerald Levine was pronounced dead at the scene. The deceased's brother, who resides at the house, claims he warned his brother repeatedly about keeping a radio plugged in near the hot tub. An electrical appliance was found in the tub and was believed to have been the cause of death. The only other witness, a landscape company foreman, Paco Alvarez, told police investigators that he saw and heard nothing unusual. The police have called the death an accident. Funeral services will be held at Beth David funeral home on Tuesday, January 12, at 10 a.m.



Part two

# A CONTAGION OF LOONS



## CHAPTER 22

Rhoda's title sounded a lot more impressive than it really was. As the new administrative head of enforcement for Northern Wisconsin, she felt as if her career had taken a turn for the better. She worked out of a small office in Green Bay, a northern Wisconsin city of a hundred thousand on the shores of Lake Michigan. She had a small apartment in town and walked to her office each morning. She was generally happy with her new position; she liked Green Bay, her coworkers, and her responsibilities, but she was lonesome and found the residents a little cooler and more aloof than those in Milwaukee.

Her staff consisted of two full-time agents and a part-time secretary. She shared Gladys, the secretary, and a suite of offices with the U.S. Forest Service. And though her staff was small, her workload was huge, covering a territory half the size of France. The Fish & Wildlife Service maintained no less than a dozen refuges, sanctuaries, hatcheries, and research stations in Northern Wisconsin. Her two agents helped her patrol this great wilderness.

The work suited Rhoda. Northern Wisconsin was her childhood home and the ancestral home of her people, the Chippewa. She was born a few hours north of Green Bay on the Bad River Reservation, one of several Chippewa reservations dotting

the Great Lakes. Besides the joy of being close to her people, she loved wilderness and devoted her life to its safekeeping. Rhoda's Native American upbringing gave her a reverence for wildlife bordering on the religious.

The enforcement arm of the US Fish and Wildlife Service was charged with investigating violations of international treaties and conventions involving protected plant and animal species, and to enforcing federal law on all Service lands, which included those same sanctuaries, refuges, research stations, and hatcheries on Rhoda's beat. In her nine months on the job, she and her two agents had successfully kept Wisconsin's great north safe from invasive plants, bugs, fish, and other creatures both human and non. The north woods, as it is known, is a sparsely populated area of lakes, forest, and wetlands, home to a dazzling variety of creatures. If there's a hunting and fishing paradise on this planet, then surely Wisconsin's north woods is it.

Rhoda liked her deputies, even though she didn't get to see them much more than once or twice a month. They, too, covered vast swaths of territory and were out of touch much of the time. The two deputies worked out of smaller sub-offices in remote locations. The closest agent, and the one she knew best, was Zayeed Hasan, a young, third generation, Arab-American biologist turned cop. Zayeed's route into law enforcement mirrored Rhoda's. They both joined the Fish & Wildlife Service just out of college, both shared a passion for wildlife, and both were committed to keeping America's vanishing wilderness as pure and wild as possible. Zayeed's wife, Farah, was studying microbiology at the local university, working on her Ph.D. in chemistry. Farah was a smart, no-nonsense woman who spoke her mind, and Rhoda was happy to have her in her life.

Zayeed lived and worked in Boulder Lake, a tiny town adjacent to the Boulder Lake Wildlife Refuge, a vast area about sixty miles west of Green Bay. The reason Rhoda got to see Zayeed more often than she saw Sam Pritchard, her other agent, was that Zayeed came to Green Bay every Friday evening to attend the

town's only mosque. In fact, the Green Bay mosque was the only mosque in the whole of northern Wisconsin. Green Bay's Muslim community numbered somewhere in the neighborhood of forty-three but was growing steadily. The mosque was located in an old Victorian house a couple of blocks from downtown. Rhoda often met Zayeed and Farah for an evening of dinner, music, or just hanging out. Every once in a while, Rhoda accompanied them to the mosque. She found the prayer service calming and the chants soothing. She didn't care much for Mullah Omar, who led the congregation and delivered the sermons, but she didn't have all that much to do with him.

One Friday evening in August, Rhoda, Zayeed, and Farah went to services at the tiny mosque. Mullah Omar had just delivered an impassioned sermon condemning Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam. The mullah, a fundamentalist Sunni from Saudi Arabia, was opposed to any deviation from the strict Wahabist line. He was tall and thin with a long gray beard. In the traditional Saudi headdress and long flowing robes, he resembled a floor lamp more than a man. Farah was annoyed by Omar's certainty that Sufism was both heretical and un-Islamic.

As the small crowd filed out into the warm summer evening, Farah approached the mullah. "Mullah Omar," she said, "I would like to respectfully take issue with your sermon. You attacked Sufism, and by extension all Sufis, as heretical. You made it sound like this was a settled matter and that all of Islam agreed with this position. In reality, this is a very narrow Wahabist point of view. I should remind you that Sufism traces its origins back to Khadija, Muhammad's wife, and Fatima, his daughter, the very beginnings of Islam."

Omar scratched his beard and considered this impudent female who had the temerity to speak to him in this manner. After a moment he replied, "Women have traditionally had no great role in the development of the faith. A strict reading of the Q'ran will illuminate their proper role as wives and mothers." This rebuke de-

livered, he saw real anger flash in Farah's eyes and hastily added, "But if I must explain myself, I will add that my main objection to Sufism is that it contaminates pure Islamic thought. It pollutes it with Greek philosophy and Christian ideas. This results in leading its adherents to forsake all righteous social and political activities. And this, I'm sure you'll agree, is strictly against the Q'ran."

"No, Mullah, I do not agree. If what you say is true, then how do you account for the fact that the Chechen rebel leader, Shaykh Shamil, and most of his followers were Sufi? Wouldn't you say the Chechen uprising was both social and political? You Wahabists talk a great deal about purity and saving the faith, but I think you have forgotten your own history. Wahabism is a mere three hundred years old, and in almost all that time, it has been considered a minor current in the great stream of Islamic thought. It hasn't even been considered Muslim by mainstream thinkers. If it wasn't for the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938, and all the money and power that brought to the Saudis, I doubt anyone would have even ever heard of Wahabism."

Omar shook his head and muttered something about not needing a history lesson from a woman. He bid Farah a curt good evening and moved on to more important matters. He shook hands with Zayeed and the other men in the room but only nodded politely to the women, reluctant and unwilling to touch them.

"Well you certainly told him off," said Rhoda.

"I just hate these holier-than-thou male chauvinists telling me what I should or shouldn't believe in. A person's relationship to his or her God is a purely personal matter. And besides, if he's going to presume to lecture on a subject like Sufism, he ought to get his facts straight."

"Way to go, girl," said Rhoda.

They left the mosque and were strolling along Green Bay's lakefront promenade when Zayeed snapped his fingers, remembering something. "Ah, I've been meaning to tell you, Rhoda. I found something interesting in the refuge today."

“Uh-oh, I’m not so sure I like the sound of that word ‘interesting,’” said Rhoda. “What did you find?”

“About a dozen dead birds scattered around a small pond—ducks mostly—a couple of mallards, one or two loons, several different species. Quite an assortment, really.”

“Did it look like a natural die-off,” Rhoda asked “or did the birds look like they were dumped there?”

“Impossible to tell, but if I had to guess I’d say natural was the more likely.” Zayeed said, guiding them into their favorite coffeehouse. “Come by tomorrow and see for yourself.”

“I’ll be there in the morning,” said Rhoda. “But right now, I need a latté.”

“Turn here,” said Zayeed, directing Rhoda’s truck off the gravel and on to a muddy track. “Pull over when you can see the pond on your right.”

“I see it,” Rhoda said, braking to a stop. All around were the bodies of birds. They were scattered over a wide area, some in the reeds and some in the water. She and Zayeed donned protective gear—masks and rubber gloves—and examined the dead. Rhoda picked up two of the nearest bodies, a teal and a loon. “Not a mark on them. Let’s get a couple of samples and see if the lab can determine the cause of death.”

“Does this look natural to you?” Zayeed asked.

“This could be bird flu” Rhoda said, putting another specimen into a large Ziploc bag. “I’ve been getting bulletins on it all summer. The Centers for Disease Control is practically hysterical about it. They think the virus is going to mutate and make the leap from birds to humans and cause the next great pandemic.”

They bagged three samples, one of each kind of bird. They were getting back in the truck when Rhoda said, “I’m going to send these samples to the Migratory Bird Research Lab in North Dakota. I’d really like to know what killed these guys. In the meantime, we should keep our eyes open for any more die-offs.”

They drove back to Zayeed’s apartment, where they

scrubbed up and decontaminated themselves as best they could. Farah served mint tea and pastries. It was Saturday, so they all hung out on the patio, chatting. After an hour or so, Rhoda took her leave. When she got back home, she turned on her computer and wrote a cover letter describing the circumstances and location of the find and requesting an analysis of the cause of death. Then, she sealed the dead birds in a special container designed to hold biological specimens, addressed the package, and dropped it in the Fed-Ex box near her apartment.

Rhoda faced another lonely weekend. She could hang around the apartment catching up on reading journals or novels, or she could force herself to go out to a movie and a meal. Either way, the weekends were lonely and long. Nine months in Green Bay had not resulted in much of a social life. If it weren't for Farah and Zayeed, she would have no social contact at all. Her work kept her busy and fulfilled so there really wasn't all that much time for self-pity. Sometimes, though, it was hard to deal with the loneliness and she thought of Bill O'Halleran and missed his reassuring presence in her life. She'd been meaning to call him for weeks now but except for a couple of emails, there hadn't been much contact.

On this particular afternoon, she changed into an old pair of shorts and running shoes and went for a jog along the lake. She ran for an hour and called it quits. On the way home, she picked up a rental movie and some Chinese takeout. She felt better having burnt off some energy. Now, there was only Sunday to get through.

## CHAPTER 23

Monday was Rhoda's day to be in the office. On Mondays, she caught up on paperwork—filed reports and wrote letters. On Tuesdays, she got to have Gladys, her shared secretary, all to herself. Gladys was a myopic, fortyish divorcee with a sunny personality and a taste for loud, floral print dresses. She was absentminded and chattered too much for Rhoda's taste, but she was efficient and helpful and ran both offices well. The Forest Service presence in Northern Wisconsin was far larger than the Fish & Wildlife Service. There are two vast national forests in the North, the Nicolet and the Chequamegon. Combined, they covered over a million and one-half acres. Managing something that size required a larger staff than that under Rhoda's supervision. So, the Forest Service enjoyed Gladys's services on Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays while Rhoda got her on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Since Rhoda was often in the field on Thursdays, she gladly loaned Gladys to Mike Collins, the forest service chief. This generosity built up a reservoir of goodwill between Mike and Rhoda, and while their relationship was strictly professional, it was leaning more and more toward genuine friendship.

On Tuesday afternoon, Rhoda got a call from the service's migratory bird lab: "Dr. Merribone here. About those dead birds



you sent us, it looks like bird flu all right. One odd thing, though, it's not a strain of flu we've seen in Wisconsin before. In fact, if memory serves, it's not a strain of flu I recognize at all. So I'm sending your samples down to the CDC in Atlanta. Let them have a look. I'll call you again when I know more."

Bird flu occurs naturally in wild birds; and all birds, wild and domestic, are susceptible. It's part of the natural order and something birds have lived with and died from for millions of years. It doesn't make the news unless it impacts on human beings, either by infecting domestic birds or their handlers. Lately, there has been a lot of fear that the influenza virus that infects humans may combine with a virulent avian strain and cause the next pandemic. It's the kind of nightmare scenario public health officials and epidemiologists lose a lot of sleep over; but unless you're in the poultry industry, there's not much you can do. So, while the news from the lab was interesting, it wasn't anything Rhoda worried about.

On Wednesdays, Rhoda headed into the field to make contact with her agents and learn her territory. She tried to visit all of the service properties at least once a month. This week, she was visiting the Fox River National Wildlife Refuge a good hundred-mile drive to the north and west of her office. She met with the staff and toured the facility. The young biologists talked about their work. It made Rhoda nostalgic for the life of the academic researcher, a life of laboratories and projects where one could focus all one's energy on the narrow subject at hand. Rhoda had served ten years at the service's forensic lab in Washington, so she knew and understood laboratory life. At Fox River, the emphasis was on wildlife management, so the research team studied the habits and ecology of predator and prey species like wolf, elk, and bear. Rhoda's life had taken her out of the lab and into the field, but she had no regrets.

She spent that night in a cabin on the refuge and on Thursday morning, she headed north to the Huxley Research Station on

Lake Superior. It was a four-hour drive through pristine wilderness. At Huxley, the biologists studied lake ecology and monitored the health of the Great Lakes. For Rhoda, however, driving to the lake was like taking a trip down memory lane. She was born not far from Huxley on the Bad River Indian Reservation. What was left of her family was still there. Her two brothers worked at the new Bad River Lodge and Casino, one brother as a blackjack dealer, and the other in security.

The presence of the casino promised great changes for the Bad River Band of the Chippewa. Most of the band's six thousand members no longer lived on the reservation but were widely scattered throughout the region. Those dispersed families had been acculturated, absorbed into the greater society, their traditions abandoned and their tribal identity largely forgotten. For those families that still lived on the reservation, the casino promised a glimmer of hope, a way to break the cycle of alcoholism, poverty, and hopelessness that plagued reservation life. Some fifteen hundred Bad River Chippewa still clung to the old ways and made their living through subsistence hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild rice. For them, the casino had become another broken promise, an intrusion, and an irritant. Their lives had not improved. The money that should have gone to such necessities as better schools and health care had been squandered through corruption, mismanagement, and theft.

The Bad River Chippewa represent a small fraction of a great nation that occupied the Great Lakes region for centuries. The Bad River people agreed to live on one hundred twenty-five thousand acres of ancestral land, signing a treaty with the United States in 1842. Once the treaty was signed, the Chippewa, who had already been converted to Catholicism, settled down to preserving their old ways. They have lived undisturbed and unmolested ever since. The huge reservation was still ninety percent wilderness, and to this day, only a few small towns reveal any human presence.

For Rhoda, the reservation was a magical place to grow up. Her family had a small house in Odanah, the principal town. Her

father worked as a logger, and her mother raised the children and sewed bead work to sell in the reservation gift shop. When Rhoda was nine, her father was killed in a logging accident. Her maternal grandmother came to live with them so her mother could work full time. The grandmother, Dancing Bear, was a loving fountain of Chippewa tradition, language, and culture. She instilled the rich cultural heritage of the Chippewa into Rhoda and her two brothers. For many of the Chippewa, the old ways were very real and civilization's thin veneer overlay a rich pagan history. At the missionary school, Rhoda learned how to read and speak English and how to be an American girl. She proved to be a bright student and was put on an academic track. After high school, she was awarded a full scholarship by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and went off to study biology.

When her mother died, two years ago, Rhoda returned for the funeral. Grandmother gave her daughter a traditional Chippewa burial, and Rhoda donned the beautifully beaded deer hide dress and chanted the ancient chant with true grief and devotion. There wasn't a Christian symbol in sight.

These were the memories she conjured up while driving to the Huxley Research Station. So many memories, so many people she remembered; was it any wonder her eyes teared up? When she saw a sign for Ashland, she took the exit, even though it took her a good forty miles out of her way. The urge to see her grandmother again was strong. She simply couldn't pass this close to her family and not pay them a visit. From Ashland, she drove the few miles into Odanah and then to the little house in which she was born.

She was disappointed when no one answered the door, but it was unlocked, so she stepped inside. She walked through the house, calling "hello" in the Chippewa tongue. She was happy to find Dancing Bear sleeping in a rocker on the back porch. She sat opposite the old lady and took a wrinkled hand in hers. Dancing Bear opened her eyes and smiled to see her granddaughter. "Little Mud Hen," she said. "This is a great surprise."

"How are you, Grandmother?"

“I am as well as an old lady can be. And you, my child, how is the white man’s world treating you?”

“I am getting along as well as an Ojibway can.”

They both laughed at this and looked lovingly at each other. Then, the old woman reached for her pipe and filled it with tobacco. She gave Rhoda a toothless smile and put fire to the bowl. She took a drag on the pipe and passed it to Rhoda, who took a puff to be polite and handed it back. The smoking of tobacco was a social custom too strong to ignore. This ritual completed, Dancing Bear said, “I had a vision last night. I will tell you of it over lunch. Are you hungry, child?”

Rhoda admitted she was, so they moved into the old familiar kitchen, and Rhoda sat in her place at the worn table where she sat as a girl. Dancing Bear shuffled back and forth across the worn linoleum floor, preparing two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cut diagonally. It was so familiar and so lovingly done that Rhoda was moved to tears. Halfway through the sandwich, Rhoda’s brother Charlie stopped in to see how the old woman was doing. He beamed with joy to find his sister sitting there.

“Now, this is a nice surprise,” he said. “Come and give your big brother a hug. Are you home to stay?”

“No brother, just passing through.”

“Ah, too bad. We miss you around here.”

They spent a few minutes catching up on Charlie’s wife and kids, his work at the casino, and his future prospects. Then it was Rhoda’s turn to tell Charlie about her life.

When she was through, he said, “I’m glad your career is going well, Sister, but a job is no substitute for a family. When are you going to find yourself a man and start raising one?”

“Come on, Charlie, give me a break. It’ll happen when it happens and not a minute before.”

Dancing Bear said in Chippewa, “The buffalo mates in her season. Old Chippewa proverb.” This defused what was becoming an awkward conversation. Charlie kissed them both and left.

Dancing Bear shuffled into the living room and motioned

Rhoda to come and sit beside her. “I must tell you of my vision. I was in a summer forest. It was full of life. There was a pond in the middle of the wood, and around this pond were many birds. On the pond swam a loon, and the loon spoke to me. The loon said, ‘Look around.’ I looked, and all of the birds were gone. The loon said there was a great danger coming. It said there will be much death. And death will come as a bird. He said I must tell Rhoda, and she will understand and she will know what to do.”

Any message from a vision was important, and Rhoda knew that no spirit message was to be taken lightly. Especially a message from the loon spirit, as her family was of the Loon Clan. Rhoda nodded her head slowly and said, “I think I understand, Grandmother. I do not know yet what I can do, but I hope I will know when the time comes.”

Dancing Bear smiled on her granddaughter and said, “The spirits sent you here today so I could give you their message. I have done their bidding; now I am tired, and I must rest.”

“Thank you, Grandmother, thank you.” Rhoda gave the old woman a pat on the hand and got up to leave. Dancing Bear was already asleep.

Rhoda was getting back into her truck when a young man called to her, “Rhoda, Rhoda Deerwalker. As I live and breathe, it is you. How great to see you again. Visiting Grandmother? How is she?”

“Ron Blackbird! I’ll be darned.” She gave him a hug and said, “I can’t believe it’s you. You look so, so grown up. Oh, and yes, Grandmother’s fine. You look terrific.”

“So do you. It’s all this healthy outdoor living. I hear you’re a big cheese with Fish and Wildlife.”

“Not so big a cheese, Ron. But I did get promoted. I have an office in Green Bay, a secretary, and two agents to boss around.”

“I always knew you’d go far. You have the brains for it.

“And how about you. Ron? Last I heard, you were working with the tribal Natural Resources Department.”

“Yep, I’m still with them. I’m senior warden now. Good

thing, too, as Wanda's expecting our first kid in October."

"Oh, that's wonderful news. Congratulations. Give Wanda my best."

"Will do, Rhoda. Great seeing you. Don't stay away so long."

Back on the road to Huxley, Rhoda reminisced. Seeing Ron Blackbird again filled her with a sad longing. They were sweethearts in high school and each one's first lover. Then, after graduation, he went into the army and she went to college. Bittersweet memories of youth. Funny they both ended up in wildlife conservation, only he with a life, a baby and a wife, and she with what — an office in Green Bay and an empty apartment.

Late Thursday afternoon, her work at Huxley was done. She drove the thirty miles to the Whitlesey Creek Bird Sanctuary, where she planned to meet with Sam Pritchard, her other enforcement agent, and spend the night. Sam was an avid birdwatcher, and he had a big crush on Esther Margolis, the sanctuary's only ranger. Esther was a Harvard-trained ornithologist, almost as pretty as she was smart. Rhoda took the tour around the sanctuary while Esther filled her in on the problems she faced. Those problems mostly centered around invasive species, dwindling populations of songbirds, and the over-hunting of waterfowl. Rhoda asked her if she'd noticed any die-offs of water birds like those she'd seen at Boulder Lake. Esther said that she hadn't seen any of that.

Sam Pritchard kept up a steady stream of clever banter and wisecracks that kept both ladies amused. Sam had that sort of personality. He combined a Midwestern cheerfulness with a keen wit and high intelligence. Together, the three of them walked on the sanctuary's nature trail and got to know each other.

"Look. There's a black-crowned heron," said Esther, pointing at a distant speck in the marsh.

"Good spotting," said Rhoda, raising her binoculars.

Sam admired Esther admiring the bird. "What a beautiful specimen," he said.

Later that afternoon, they barbecued fresh trout and swapped bird-watching stories. Rhoda intended to stay overnight and head home to Green Bay on Friday morning. By the time she arrived home, she would have driven a big circle on the map and covered several hundred miles. It was a lot of driving, but at least she was out of the office and breathing fresh air. She loved being in the field. The sun was getting low, and the sanctuary was at once peaceful and calm and filled with life and sound. Rhoda was just settling in to a relaxing evening when her cell phone rang.

It was Gladys, “Where’ve you been? I’ve been calling all day. Dr. Merribone left a message for you this morning. A Doctor Barnes from the CDC wants to speak to you right away. It’s about those dead birds you found. I have his number; you have a pencil?”

“Sorry, Gladys, I was out of contact most of the day,” Rhoda told her secretary. You know how spotty cell phone coverage is up here. Hang on; I’m heading to the office for a pencil.”

Rhoda dialed the number Gladys gave her and waited to be connected. “Hello, Dr. Barnes, this is Rhoda Deerwalker with the Fish & Wildlife Service in Wisconsin returning your call.”

“Oh yes. Miss Deerwalker. Glad you could get back to me so fast. Those dead birds you found have caused quite a stir. They appear to have died of a strain of avian flu hitherto fore unknown to us. We’re doing more tests to determine exactly what we’re up against. So, until we have a better handle on this new strain, I need to warn you to handle those dead birds with caution and to keep the public away from the contaminated area until you can dispose of the corpses. If you see any more die-offs, call me immediately.”

“Tell me Dr. Barnes, is it safe to be handling those dead birds at all? Have my coworker and I been exposed to something infectious? Are we in any danger?”

“No, no, dead birds can’t transmit influenza, and bird-to-human transmission is extremely rare. Unless you get infected blood in an open wound, you’ll be safe. There’s no danger from touching them, but I’d like you to incinerate the dead birds, just to

be safe. Take reasonable precautions; wear gloves and face masks and don't handle any sick or dying birds. Influenza is transmitted through the air, so if there's any danger of catching anything, it'll come from handling sick birds."

"Well, that's a relief," Rhoda said.

Rhoda tried calling Zayeed on his cell phone, but in the vast and largely empty north woods, cell phone service was spotty at best. She failed to make contact with Zayeed, so she tried Farah and got lucky. She told Farah about the phone call with Dr. Barnes of the CDC.

"Tell Zayeed to cordon off the area and keep the public away; and tell him not to handle the dead birds until I get there."

After speaking to Farah, she said goodbye to Sam and Esther and started the long drive back to Boulder Lake. It was late in the day, but if she hurried, she just might get to Boulder Lake before dark.



## CHAPTER 24

It's a long, beautiful drive across Wisconsin's Great North, endless forest dotted with lakes and tiny towns. The sun was low in the sky when Rhoda, still a couple of hours away from Boulder Lake, turned off the main road and onto a forest service shortcut she knew. The road through the woods cut an hour off the trip. She was bumping along the rutted, little-used trail when she heard rifle shots off to her right. The shots rang out loud and clear, no more than a quarter-mile away. Seconds later, she saw an old van on the side of the road, and even though she was in a hurry to get to Boulder Lake, she was curious enough to wonder who was shooting what this time of year. Enforcing Wisconsin's hunting laws was not her job, but it was late August and not yet hunting season, so whoever was shooting was in violation. She pulled over and waited by the van.

She wasn't waiting long when out of the woods walked three hunters in full camouflage. The two in the lead were dragging a young black bear by its hind legs. They were followed by a big man carrying the rifles.

Rhoda walked over to the group and flashed her Fish & Wildlife credentials. She directed her attention to the big man with the guns. "Put the rifles on the ground and step away from them, please." Her hand rested on her holster as she said this. This was

standard procedure when approaching a group of armed men in remote places. Still, she wondered what she was getting herself into.

Fortunately, the man complied and Rhoda kept control of the situation. She asked the group, “You folks have a valid bear hunting license?” Rhoda already knew the answer to this, as it was August and bear season was in October.

The big bearded man carrying the rifles answered for the group, “We forgot to bring it. It’s back at the compound.”

Rhoda knew that this was bullshit, but she played along, trying to keep the situation calm and at the same time, garner more information. She asked, “Oh? And where is this compound of yours?” Now that they were closer, Rhoda noticed the military style shoulder patches on their shirts. The patch, in the shape of a shield, had the letters “LPA” above a skull, a bloody dagger in its eye.

The big man responded by pointing vaguely east and saying, “About five clicks over that way.”

“What’s LPA stand for? I see the letters on your patch.”

“Oh, we’re the Lord’s Patriot Army. You ever hear of us?” The man turned his shoulder to her so she could see it clearly. “If you’d like to know more about us, I have some pamphlets in the van.”

“I’d like to learn more about you, sure. But first we need to talk about our little friend here,” Rhoda said gesturing toward the dead bear. You must know that bear season isn’t until October. You boys are a couple of months early.”

“Well, yeah, we know, but we’re not hunting for fun, you know. This bear is for food. Don’t that make any difference? This is about survival. We’re survivalists; we live off the land.”

“Survivalists, huh?” Rhoda said. “I’m happy that you intend to eat this bear. I’d hate to think you killed it just for the heck of it. But to answer your question, no, it doesn’t make any difference what you do with it. The law is pretty clear about hunting out of season and hunting without a license. Both are pretty hefty offenses. You’re looking at a five-hundred-dollar fine, and that’s for

each of you. Plus, you'll have to forfeit the kill."

This latest bit of bad news got the big man agitated. He looked beseechingly at Rhoda and said, "Aw man, that's not fair. We've been trackin' this fucker all day. If we come back empty handed, there'll be hell to pay." The other two hunters, who hadn't moved or spoken much, shook their heads in agreement. "You're gonna disappoint a lot of hungry people."

Rhoda looked the big man in the eye and said, "Look, Sir, those are the rules. I don't make them; I just enforce them. I'm going to need to see some identification for all of you. Would you collect them for me please?"

The big guy muttered something, and the other two hunters dug into their pockets for their wallets. The bearded man collected the identity cards, added his own to the pile, and handed it over. Rhoda sensed hostility as the big man gave her a nasty look.

"You really gonna bust us for huntin'? Can't you give us a break? This bear could feed us for a week. I ain't shittin' you, Lady; we really need this meat."

"By us," Rhoda asks, "I'm assuming you mean the compound. How many of you survivalists are there?"

"At the moment, we're eight men strong. Eight God-fearin' men. At one time, we had twenty; I expect we will again someday. You see, we are righteous fighters for the Lord and protectors of the American way. I'm Todd Hanks, by the way." The big, bearded man's hand swallowed up Rhoda's.

"Rhoda Deerwalker," she replied, thinking now that the big fellow didn't look all that nasty. Rhoda looked through the pile of I.D.s. The two silent hunters were named Clarence Shipman and Ralph Dexter. She didn't know which one was which and didn't much care, but she made a mental note of the names and handed back the cards. She said to Todd Hanks, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Mr. Hanks; I'm going to let you all go with a warning just this once. Needless to say, if I catch any of you hunting out of season or hunting without a license a second time, I'm going to throw the book at you. You have no special privilege to hunt when

you want. Next time you need meat, go to the store like everybody else.”

“That’s very kind of you, Ma’am. You can rest assured you won’t catch us hunting again.”

Rhoda knew in her bones that that was a bald-faced lie.

As Rhoda was pulling away, Todd Hanks tapped on her window and handed her a pamphlet. He said, “That was a kind thing you did lettin’ us off, Miz Deerwalker. Here’s that pamphlet about the LPA.”

When Rhoda finally arrived in Boulder Lake, it was after dark. Zayeed was there to greet her and Farah to feed her. Zayeed told her he had cordoned off the pond with yellow caution tape. “Tomorrow, we’ll collect the dead birds and burn them. Tonight, you’ll have some couscous, a glass of wine, and a good sleep. You must be exhausted.”

“It’s been a full day. I thought Muslims didn’t drink wine.” she yawned.

“This one does,” Zayeed said.

During dinner, Rhoda told them about her encounter with the Lord’s Patriot Army. She showed her hosts the pamphlet Todd Hanks gave her and on a map, pointed out where the incident took place. Then, they talked some about survivalist cults, but no one knew very much about them. Rhoda made a mental note to look them up next time she had a few minutes on a computer. She asked Zayeed to keep an eye peeled for the LPA compound; then, when she was unable to keep herself awake, Zayeed made up the sofa into a guest bed. She bid her friends goodnight. That night, she slept as if she was in a coma.

The next morning at breakfast, Farah asked Rhoda if there was any danger of catching influenza from the dead birds. Rhoda told her, “The man at the CDC said that there wasn’t much danger in handling them. Unless you manage to get their blood in an open wound, you can’t catch the flu. The CDC made it clear that the virus was transmitted through breathing, and those dead birds cer-

tainly aren't doing any of that. It's the sick ones we have to watch out for."

"Just be very careful, please," said Farah. "I need my man healthy." Then she whispered in Rhoda's ear, "He's going to be a father soon."

That morning, Zayeed and Rhoda donned their protective gear and gathered up the dead birds. They searched in a spiral around the lake but found no more bodies. They dropped nine dead birds into a metal drum. Zayeed poured kerosene on them and tossed in a match. Instantly the air filled with the stink of burning feathers. Once again, they walked around the area looking for any sick, dying, or dead birds but found none. They stood around in silence, watching the black oily smoke ascend. Finally, Zayeed said, "You know, not finding any sick birds makes me question my belief that this was a natural, isolated occurrence."

"If this wasn't a natural die-off," Rhoda said, "I mean, if these birds were dumped here by someone, the implications are truly frightening."

"You're thinking about how those birds got infected?" Zayeed asked.

"How they got sick and how they came to be dumped out here. The CDC said we're dealing with a unique strain of bird flu. We could be looking at something really sinister here."

The bird bodies were burnt to ash and they were walking back to the truck, when a glint of something metallic caught Rhoda's eye. She bent down for a closer look and came up with a man's gold ring hidden in the tall grass. It was an ugly thing with what Rhoda now recognized as the symbol of the Lord's Patriot Army— a skull with a dagger in one ruby eye—carved into it. She showed her find to Zayeed and asked him, "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"I can't say that I have."

"Those hunters I stopped in the woods yesterday, they

wore this symbol on their shirts. How's that for a coincidence?"

Zayeed interrupted Rhoda's musing on cosmic coincidences by saying, "You're thinking there could be a connection with this LPA bunch of loonies and our dead birds? That ring could have been dropped here by a hunter. It could have been lying there for months, years even. It might have no connection with anything."

"True, but you have to admit it's a hell of a coincidence," mused Rhoda.

Later that day, Rhoda researched survivalist militias on the Internet. She learned that there were hundreds of them scattered throughout the country. There were many more in California and the West than in the Midwest, but when she narrowed the search to Wisconsin, she came up with a few solid hits. The Lord's Patriot Army was prominent among them.

Private militias in America are an outgrowth of the second amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees the right of citizens to bear arms. The founding fathers had in mind an armed citizenry as a last defense against tyranny, but, in true American fashion, what started out as a guaranty of civil liberties has morphed into bands of heavily armed men with bizarre agendas running around the woods. The rights of these militias to amass arsenals of deadly weapons are fiercely defended by the gun lobby, which vigorously opposes any attempt to regulate by law the right of one American to shoot another. Fortunately, the government recognizes the potential danger to itself and keeps a close eye on the militias through a network of undercover FBI agents.

The FBI and the Internet make little distinction between private militias like the LPA and fanatical cults in general. Rhoda was shocked to learn that these militias provided the training grounds for religious zealots, apocalyptic survivalists, political fringe groups, and hate-filled racists. Good God, she thought, combine this stew of misguided, disaffected individuals with a few charismatic leaders, give them arms, isolation, and time, and you have exactly the militia situation in this country.

A Google search for The Lord's Patriot Army turned up some useful information from cult watch groups: The LPA was considered extremely secretive; it preached a violent anti-government ideology; the sect operated out of a two-hundred-acre compound in Wisconsin's North Woods; the group's leader, Desmond Castle, was a notorious neo-Nazi hatemonger who attracted a small, fanatical group of followers, who adhered to a volatile mixture of Christian/apocalyptic, anti government, white supremacist xenophobia; they believed they were God's chosen children and expected to survive the imminent destruction of the world; and finally, it was believed that the group had ties to several other extremist hate groups like the Posse Comitatus, the Ku Klux Klan, and the American Nazi Party.

Nice neighbors, thought Rhoda as she searched the Internet for clues to the group's whereabouts. After a great deal of searching, she found an old magazine article that mentioned a "heavily guarded compound near the town of Misty Lake." Rhoda called up Mapquest and located the town twenty miles north of Boulder Lake. She relayed this information to Zayeed and asked him to see if he could find the place.

## CHAPTER 25

Misty Lake was nothing more than a dot on the map. It consisted of a general store and a hundred boarded-up fishing camps, and not much else. It came alive during the summer wall-eye season, and the season was just about over for the year. The Bait & Switch sold groceries, bait, and gas and rented canoes to the fishing community. Zayeed knew the place and made it a point to stop in for a soda his next time through the area. Cliff, the owner, greeted Zayeed and launched into a rehash of the latest fishing gossip. They discussed the near-record muskie someone landed a few weeks back. After a few minutes of small talk, Zayeed brought the conversation around to what he really wanted to talk about. “Tell me, Cliff, you ever hear of the LPA, Lord’s Patriot Army? Don’t they live around here somewhere?”

Cliff’s smile waned, “What the heck do you want with those loonies?” he asked.

“I don’t want anything with them,” said Zayeed. “I was just wondering if you’d ever seen any of them.”

“Every now and then.”

“They come in here for supplies?” Zayeed asked.

“Nah. They mostly get what they need by growin’ it or shootin’ it. But some of ‘em come in here now and again for a pack



of smokes or a case of beer.”

“Don’t they have a camp nearby?”

“Not too far,” said Cliff, not offering any information.

Zayeed said, “I read a magazine article about them. It said they have a compound a couple of miles east off Route 6 near Blixton.”

“Why, that’s pure bull,” Cliff said. “They ain’t more’n two miles from where you’re standing. Just up that little road out behind the store.”

“I guess the magazine didn’t know what it was talking about.” Zayeed finished his soda and bid Cliff good day.

Zayeed drove around to the back of the store and there, behind the Dumpster, was a small dirt track. It was no wonder Zayeed had never noticed it before, even though he’d been this way dozens of times. The road didn’t appear on his map, yet there it was. It was nothing more than two strips of dirt with a grassy stripe between them. A few yards farther along, there was a big Keep Out sign declaring the road private and threatening prosecution to trespassers. Zayeed went on ahead at a cautious ten miles per hour.

About two miles into the woods, Zayeed came to a large clearing surrounded by a chain link fence. The fence was topped with coiled razor wire, surveillance cameras, and spotlights. A large gate fronted the road. Behind the gate was a guardhouse with an actual guard inside. Zayeed gave the guard a wave as he drove past. The guard did not wave back; instead, he picked up a telephone and reported the trespasser.

Zayeed kept driving down the road as though he were a lost tourist. He could see three wood-framed buildings forming a horseshoe around an open area with a flagpole in its center. Hanging from the pole was the biggest American flag Zayeed had ever seen. It hung limp and upside down. The back of the horseshoe was formed by a fair-sized log home. Two low military style buildings made up the horseshoe’s sides. If there was anyone else in residence besides the guard, Zayeed failed to see them. Once past

the compound, Zayeed didn't see another sign of civilization for the next six miles. When he finally reached a paved road, he drove until he had cell phone service and called Rhoda. "I found them," he said. "I found the LPA."

In one of her regular reports to Terry Winter, Rhoda told her supervisor about the dead birds and her encounter with the LPA. Terry knew of the LPA and called Rhoda to warn her to tread carefully.

"Do you think there's a connection between the birds and the LPA?" he asked.

"Well, I did find a ring with their insignia on it when we were burning the dead birds."

"Hmm. That's an interesting coincidence," Terry said. "But it's not enough to get all worked up about. We have quite a file on those guys. They've been annoying the service for as long as I can remember. They hunt and fish when and where they please. We've fined them a dozen times over the years. Be careful dealing with them, Rhoda; they're a particularly nasty bunch. They hate the government, and that's who you represent. They probably hate you double for being a woman and a Native American. I'd keep away from them if I were you."

Rhoda reassured Terry that she'd give them a wide berth and that she'd be careful if she had to deal with them. The discussion moved on to bureaucratic matters, but Rhoda couldn't get the LPA out of her head. Finally, she said, "You know, Terry, I'm real curious about the LPA. Don't you think I ought to at least check them out, see what they have going on at that compound of theirs?"

"What are you going to do, Rhoda, break in there and look around? You'll get shot for trespassing or worse, arrested for breaking and entering. Either way, you'll be up shit's creek and out of a job. The service won't help you out if you break the law. As despicable as they may be, they're still citizens and have their rights."

A few hours later, Rhoda had a similar conversation with Mike Collins, her office suite-mate and forest service administrator. Mike was a friend, and they often had lunch together when Rhoda was in the office. They were eating hot dogs from a cart in the little park across the street.

Between bites, Mike told her, “We have a pretty hefty file on the LPA, ourselves. We suspect them of starting a major forest fire about six years back. Pretty nearly burned a hundred thousand acres of prime timber before we got it out. Never could prove anything, though. That compound of theirs borders national forest land. We’ve cited them dozens of times for firearms violations, fires, camping, harassing hikers, stuff like that. All petty crap but a constant irritant. They’re not nice people, but as far as we can tell, they haven’t killed anyone yet.

Rhoda asked, “Did you ever meet their leader—what’s his name—Desmond something?”

“Desmond Castle. Yeah, I saw him once. Heard his rant. I think he’s a dangerous psycho, a hate-filled white supremacist. He’s anti-everything you and I consider good about this country. I always thought what a hypocrite he was, ready to tear down the government on one hand, but quick to hide behind the Constitution if he feels his precious civil rights are being violated. If you want my advice, Rhoda, I’d stay far away from those characters. Let the FBI deal with them.”

Friday evening came around again, and Rhoda met Farah and Zayeed on the waterfront. They grabbed a quick bite of dinner from a kebab stand and then headed to the mosque. The Green Bay Mosque was a long way from the grand Islamic palaces of the Arab world. It was a small wood frame house on a residential side street. It said a lot about Green Bay’s tiny Muslim community that there was a mosque in town at all.

In deference to the neighbor’s sensibilities, there were no loudspeakers calling the faithful to prayer five times a day. The faithful and the curious just filtered in at prayer time. They gath-

ered in what was once the house's parlor. The room was lined with piles of prayer rugs with the center left clear for praying. Like every other Friday evening in Rhoda's experience, there were about a dozen men and a half-dozen women present. Men and women prayed in adjoining rooms then gathered together afterwards to share tea and cookies. The men prayed in what was once the parlor and the women in what must have been the dining room. A screen separated the rooms but the women could hear the Mullah lead the service and his remarks at the end.

Farah unrolled a prayer rug from a stack while Rhoda took a seat along the wall. Mullah Omar came out and the service began. This was Rhoda's time to reflect on spiritual matters. She was a full-blooded Chippewa, and even though she was nominally Christian, the old Chippewa religion never really died in her. Rhoda's maternal grandmother was diligent in passing on the ancient prayers and chants, and it was those prayers to Wotonka and his spirit minions that meant the most to her. As the Arabic prayers were uttered, Rhoda chanted to herself in Chippewa. Undistracted by the trappings of Christianity or of a language she could not understand, Rhoda meditated on the mysteries undisturbed. She was not a religious person; she was a scientist, after all, a biologist, but she found comfort sending an ancient Chippewa prayer for health, peace, or a good buffalo hunt into the void as satisfying as any religious service. Amidst a babble of Arabic, Rhoda prayed in her own way. She could only imagine how upset the mullah would be to know that she wasn't mouthing Koranic verses.

After the service, Rhoda mingled with the congregation. Mullah Omar was sipping tea and chatting with three foreign-looking young men. Omar was a thin, ascetic-looking man of forty-five with a stringy beard and yellow teeth. He wore a Saudi headdress and the flowing robes of a Muslim cleric. He broke off his conversation when Rhoda approached. She knew better than to offer her hand, as he would not take it. Mullah Omar was pleased to speak with Rhoda, marking her as a potential convert. She said, "Mullah, I have a question about your sermon. Do you have a moment?"

“I always have time for questions of faith. How can I help you, my child?”

“In your sermon this evening, you said that Islam was the only true religion and that non-believers could never enter paradise.”

“So the Koran teaches us,” Omar said, his yellow teeth exposed in a rare smile. “Is it not the same with Christians and Jews?”

“Yes, of course, it’s the same, but that doesn’t make it right or sensible,” Rhoda said, “If we are all praying to the same God, what difference does the ritual make?”

“Ah, my child, we do not consider Islam mere ritual. It is revealed truth. And you either accept it fully or you imperil your immortal soul.”

“That’s exactly what my Christian teacher said about Christianity,” Rhoda sighed. “Isn’t it just that kind of exclusivity that keeps people apart? Isn’t that what causes all the intolerance in the world? You’d think the great religions would have learned this simple fact by now.”

“Islam is most tolerant. We just believe all other religions are misguided. And I am certain that once exposed to the ‘true faith’ they and you will see the light.”

Rhoda had had enough of Mullah Omar’s stubborn intolerance. She may as well have been speaking to a priest or a rabbi. All organized religions jealously guard their versions of the “truth.” Without their exclusive rituals, the priests would all be out of jobs. “Thank you for your time, Mullah, but I’m searching for a more enlightened spiritual path.”

This time Mullah Omar’s smile was tight lipped and forced; he gave her a curt nod and walked off to speak to more orthodox believers.

Across the room, she noticed Zayeed speaking with the young men she had just seen clustered around Omar a few minutes before. They were conversing in Arabic, so instead of joining them, she looked for Farah. She found her kneeling in front of a stroller,

making baby noises. Rhoda thought fleetingly of how she would like a family someday. She joined Farah, and they made small talk until Zayeed came over and it was time to leave.

## CHAPTER 26

After leaving the mosque, Rhoda, Farah, and Zayeed made their way to the coffee shop they liked. As they walked, they talked. Rhoda asked Zayeed what he was saying to the young men at the mosque.

“It was a strange conversation,” Zayeed replied. “Those young men, they wouldn’t speak in English, even though I suspect they speak it perfectly well and my Arabic is pretty rudimentary; but I asked them if they were students and what they were studying. One fellow who was more talkative than the others said they were from Egypt and they were doing graduate work in genetics at the local branch of the university. I wanted to ask more questions, but Omar came over and they clammed right up.”

“I didn’t know you could take graduate courses in genetics in Green Bay,” said Rhoda.

“No, you can’t,” said Farah, “You would have to go to Madison for that. I ought to know; I looked into it.”

“Well, like I said, my Arabic isn’t the best; maybe I misunderstood.”

The coffeehouse was busy, but they found a table and ordered drinks. There were posters and notices tacked on every wall. It gave the place a funky, cluttered feel. They sipped their

drinks, comfortable enough with each other to enjoy being silent. Rhoda looked around at the jumble of notices pinned to the wall behind Zayeed's head: House sitter wanted, lawns mowed, lost cat, folk music concert, short story contest, poetry slam, North Woods Survivalist Exposition. That last one made her gasp and choke on her coffee.

"Hey, look at this." Rhoda pulled the poster off the wall and put it on the table for all to see. She read aloud, "North Woods Survivalist Exposition Sunday August 16 at the Greyson Falls Grange Hall. Over twenty vendors and militias represented. Come and learn about alternate lifestyles. Admission five dollars per person. Children under twelve free."

"That's this Sunday," said Rhoda. "How's that for a piece of luck?"

"It sounds like a fair," said Farah.

"A hate fair," added Zayeed.

"I wonder if the LPA will be there," Rhoda said aloud.

"I suggest we all go to Greyson Falls on Sunday and see what we can see," said Zayeed.

With that, they clinked their coffee cups together and smiled conspiratorially.

On Sunday, Rhoda, Farah, and Zayeed drove to Greyson Falls. The Survivalist Exposition was a crowded affair with booths and stalls filling the old hall and spilling out into the parking lot. There were tables selling books filled with conspiracy theories; a couple of booths sold survivalist gear, mostly Army-Navy surplus. There were several gun dealers present; vendors hawked Nazi memorabilia; and another advertised videos on how to survive the coming race war. There was a table full of tee shirts with slogans like: Amerika—Keep It Pure. Rhoda saw a booth devoted to alien abduction and another advertising White Power. Off in a corner was a tarot reader, and for some reason, a guy dressed to look like Hitler goose-stepped around on stilts. She was asked to sign a petition to amend the Constitution to "ban Jews and Negroes from



owning property” and another “to prohibit gay marriage.” All in all, it was a hodgepodge of hate groups, nut jobs, and zanies in a fair-like setting. There were several food vendors— you could eat funnel cakes and cotton candy while learning about the Atlanteans and buying an Uzi. People seemed to be having a good time; there was even a juggler and a bluegrass band.

“Look what I see.” Zayeed pointed to a table in the corner of the room where the Lord’s Patriot Army’s banner was draped over a card table. There was no mistaking their skull and dagger symbol. A well-groomed, middle-aged man sat behind a stack of books and pamphlets. The man’s hair was short. Graying at the temples, it gave him a distinguished look. He wore a black shirt and the LPA armband. Standing behind him were four more black-shirted militiamen in the same Nazi-style uniform. The four storm troopers stood with their arms folded on their chests, staring straight ahead, unsmiling. Rhoda recognized Todd Hanks and the two hunters from their forest encounter. The tableau made the LPA look like a formidable force, a lot more menacing than it really was. “I count five men here,” Rhoda whispered to Zayeed. “Look around and see if you can spot any others.” She nodded in the direction of the LPA table. “I’ll check out the literature and talk to the fuhrer.”

Rhoda walked over to the table and picked up a book. She idly leafed through it and realized that the photo on the back cover was of the man seated in front of her. Desmond Castle looked at her with piercing steel gray eyes and asked, “Are you looking for something special? Can I interest you in the truth?”

Rhoda handed the book to him and said, “Is that what I’m likely to find in here, Mr. Castle, the truth?”

“That is exactly what you’ll find, Miss ... er”

“Smith” supplied Rhoda, holding out her hand.

Castle ignored her outstretched hand; instead he stood up and said, “So tell me, Miss Smith, you appear to be an intelligent woman. Wouldn’t you like to know how your government has been screwing you over? How they’ve been monkeying around with

your God-given rights? You should know that when Judgment Day comes—and I assure you it is coming—we, the righteous guardians of the Constitution, will arise. On that great day we shall take back the power, the power we have foolishly squandered, the God-given power of the white Christian man. We shall wrest that power from the dead hands of our contemptible, corrupt, and spineless leaders. On that day, when good Christian men like me are in charge, you will see an end to our human pollution problem.”

“And you define ‘human pollution’ how, exactly?” Rhoda asked.

“Jews, blacks, foreigners, Indians, and promiscuous women,” said Castle, emphasizing the last two items on his list with a twisted sneer. “Did I say Indians? I meant Native Americans; I wouldn’t want to appear politically incorrect.” He found his wit amusing and gave Rhoda a flawless smile.

He continued his soliloquy, “When we’ve cleaned up the human sewer, we’ll finally have paradise on earth. Just think; no more abortion, no rap music, and no immigration problem— all foreigners will be given the opportunity to return to their third-world shit-holes before we throw their stinking bodies in the sea. Oops, there I go again, being insensitive. But I’m not joking, Miss Smith. When the righteous come to power, the only rights people like you will have is the right to stay on your reservation and fuck goats.

“There are plans underway even as we speak to cleanse the world of its human waste. To flush away billions and leave it as pure as the Lord intended. Judgment Day is coming, Miss Smith. If I were you, I’d look to my immortal soul. Here, you can read more about it in my book, twelve-fifty if you’re buying. If not, get your Native American ass away from my table.”

Rhoda was struck speechless. She had never before confronted so much concentrated poison. And what made it so disturbing was that it was delivered with such conviction by what to all appearances was a handsome and charming man. She felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. All she knew was

that she hated this man every bit as much as he seemed to hate her. She wouldn't know where to begin to argue with such mindless stupidity, but she made a silent vow to do whatever she could to see that he died in the obscurity he deserved, preferably in a federal prison somewhere. She tossed the book back on the table, took a step backward, and was about to turn and leave when Todd Hanks, arms folded in the back row, gave her a big wink.

Zayeed joined her and reported spotting two other cult members working the hall, "They're gathering signatures for a newsletter or something—The Daily Bigot, I think it's called." Rhoda was too angry to be amused by Zayeed's humor. "That makes seven LPA here at the fair," Rhoda said. "If what the guy in the woods told me was true, there are eight LPA members living at the compound. They're all here but one. That leaves only one idiot watching the store. What do you say, Zayeed? We may never get another chance like this. Come on, Zayeed; let's find Farah and get out of here."

Rhoda's blood was up. Before he could reply, she grabbed Zayeed by the hand and dragged him toward the exit. They found Farah talking with the Atlanteans. Zayeed grabbed her arm and hauled her to the car. "You know, Rhoda," said Zayeed, "you could be making a mistake. Shouldn't you wait until you calm down, give this more thought?"

"There's something sick and twisted about the LPA," Rhoda said. "It's amazing such blind, stupid hatred is allowed to flourish in our midst."

"I don't know if I'd call the LPA flourishing," said Zayeed.

"I want to check out their compound. These lunatics are up to something; I can feel it. And this is our golden opportunity. "

As they pulled away from Greyson Falls, Zayeed said, "Rhoda, I do not like this idea of yours. It's rash, probably illegal, and possibly dangerous. These people might live in a fantasy land, but I'll bet they know how to be violent. Imagine what they'd do if they caught us, an Indian and an Arab? Even if they didn't shoot you for trespassing, they're bound to hang me as a terrorist. Also,

there's the little matter that if you're caught breaking and entering, you'll lose your job."

"Don't worry, Zayeed," Rhoda leaned over to squeeze his shoulder, "I'm not asking you to do anything. I would never involve you in something dangerous. All I want is a ride back to your place. I'll pick up my car and go alone. It's just a scouting expedition. I don't want to get mixed up in anything, either."

During the thirty-minute drive back to Boulder Lake, the usual friendly banter was replaced with thoughtful silence. When they got back to Zayeed's apartment, they said their goodbyes and Rhoda started toward her car. Zayeed, who had apparently changed his mind, called to her, "If you're so determined to do this thing, Rhoda, I will go with you. But only to drive the car and watch out that no harm comes to you. I will not go inside. Is that understood?"

Rhoda patted him on the back and said, "You're a good friend, Zayeed. Thanks."

The Bait & Switch was closed on Sundays, so no one saw Zayeed's sedan pull around the back of the store and on to the hidden road. They drove slowly, watchfully; there were no signs of life. Rhoda had Zayeed stop the car out of sight of the front gate. She peeked around some bushes and saw that the gate was chained shut and there was no one in the guardhouse. Inside the guardhouse Rhoda could see that the security monitors were on and working but there was no sign of the guard. If there was a guard, he was derelict in his duty. Rhoda called, "Hello, anyone home?" Her voice startled a couple of crows, but nothing human stirred. She told Zayeed to pull the car off the road and out of sight while she walked the fence line looking for a point of entry. She took off before she could hear Zayeed's objections.

Desmond castle's hate-filled words kept repeating in her mind. What did he mean by "There are plans underway even as we speak to cleanse the world of its human waste, to flush away billions and leave it as pure as the Lord intended"? Although personal

insults and ethnic slurs were offensive, she could deal with them, but a veiled threat against billions, well, that was a different matter entirely. Breaking in to the compound was probably not the smartest thing Rhoda had ever done, but if it turned up evidence of something nefarious, then, in her mind, it was worth the risk.

Rhoda walked the fence line in a clockwise direction, keeping the compound on her right. The fence looked new and in good repair. There was a long low building on her right. It looked to her like a military barracks, but she couldn't see inside to know for sure. She rounded a corner; now on her right was a well-kept, two-story log home. She kept well into the trees paralleling the cleared area near the fence. Still, she crouched low to slip past any watching eyes. Around the last corner, the other low military-style building was on her right. It was there she found a way in. At a place where the fence crossed an intermittent stream, there was a low spot; there was just enough of a gap that a small woman might just slip under. Without hesitation, Rhoda got down on her back and wriggled under the wire, tearing her shirt in the process.

Rhoda found herself behind a long wooden building. She stood on tiptoe and looked in the nearest window. What she saw was a room lined on both sides with cots, blankets tight, and made with military precision. At the foot of each cot was a small wooden trunk, a footlocker. And at the head of each was a pair of metal lockers. Everything was meticulously aligned with the idiotic precision of the military. The floor was waxed to a mirror-like shine. The sterility of it made Rhoda sad. The next window revealed a shower and toilet facilities for a dozen men. The last window looked into a private bedroom, most likely the NCO's quarters. Next, Rhoda darted behind the log house. She didn't want to get too close to the house; something about it made her feel uneasy, so she gave it a wide berth. Instead, she inspected the low building on the other side. This second building was a twin of the first—same style, same size, same dull mustard-colored clapboards. The first window she looked into opened onto a good-sized kitchen; the next window revealed a mess hall. The last two windows looked into

an office. The room looked neglected; there were dust balls under three of the four desks. Rhoda got the impression that the LPA was a dwindling organization. Along one wall of the office were several sets of filing cabinets. Rhoda wondered what was in those files.

Seeing no evidence of a burglar alarm, Rhoda got up on tip-toes and unclipped the window screen and pushed up on the window. To her surprise, it opened. It was too high off the ground for her to open the window more than an inch, so she scampered back to the mess hall and dragged a nearly empty garbage can under the open window. She climbed on the pail and opened the window fully.

The room contained four desks, only one of which seemed to be in use, filing cabinets, computers, and an old-fashioned floor safe. The filing cabinets were locked, as were the desk drawers. On one desk was a box of computer CDs. She hurriedly looked through them and took one labeled “correspondence 2005” and slipped it into her pocket. On a bulletin board, she saw a duty roster listing the names of the cult members and their duties for the week; she took that too. The wastepaper baskets were empty, and she saw no loose papers anywhere. She opened a closet and saw shelves of office supplies, some parkas, and rain gear. On the closet floor were several cartons of Desmond Castle’s book, *A Time to Hate*. Not a big seller, apparently.

She climbed out of the office the way she entered and returned the garbage can to where she found it. She got the bright idea to look inside the garbage can for something useful. The can held several plastic trash bags. She grabbed one that appeared to have papers in it. She was just leaving when the back door to the kitchen opened and a man walked out onto the back deck with a coffee cup in one hand and a garbage bag in the other. Rhoda ducked low behind the garbage cans as the man walked down the steps toward her. She held her breath, certain she would be discovered the minute he opened a can. He was six feet away when there was the sound of a car horn blaring insistently at the front gate. The man tossed the garbage bag in the general direction of the can

and ran to open the gate. The Lord's Patriot Army had returned.

Rhoda's exit was on the other side of the compound. She crouched and sprinted behind the log house, hoping not to be seen. She glimpsed the guard jogging to the front gate. Two black Chevy Suburbans were lined up outside. Desmond Castle was already screaming at the hapless guard. She paused for another quick look. The gate was open and the black cars were entering. Rhoda darted across the gap to the shelter of the barracks. She found the low spot under the fence; car doors were slamming and she could hear men's voices. She pushed the garbage bag through the gap and wriggled herself after. She was outside the compound and safe in the shrubbery when she noticed the security cameras mounted on a tall pole in the corner. There was no time to do anything about them now. If they caught her on tape, so what? She'd be long gone before they could do anything about it. In a second, she was deep in the woods and heading for Zayeed. Breathless, she tossed the trash bag in the car and got in beside the him.

"There. That didn't take long, did it?" she said.

"The longest twenty minutes of my life," said Zayeed as he pulled slowly away from the compound.

Back at Zayeed's apartment, they made themselves drinks and toasted their good luck. Zayeed called Rhoda a cat burglar and she said he was the best getaway man in the business. They all felt happy the caper was over and nobody got caught. After a while they looked through the stuff Rhoda found. The garbage bag contained exactly what most garbage bags contain: egg shells, old newspapers, empty cans, and lots of packaging. "They aren't into recycling, apparently," observed Farah, looking at all the aluminum cans.

"And if this is evidence of their diet," said Zayeed holding up a half-dozen Twinkie wrappers, "they aren't eating very well."

"What do you expect without a woman around to take care of them?" teased Rhoda.

The only item of any use was a crumpled copy of a late

notice from a biological supply house threatening a lawsuit if their bill for four thousand seventy-three dollars wasn't paid immediately.

"What the hell are Nazi thugs doing purchasing laboratory equipment?" asked Farah. "I would be willing to wager that there isn't a single one of those Neanderthals that have more than a high school education. I wonder what they purchased."

"I suppose it wouldn't be too hard to find out," said Rhoda. "All we have to do is call them and ask for an itemized copy of the invoice."

The other two items Rhoda brought back with her were the roster of names and the computer disc marked "correspondence 2005." Farah tried it in her computer, but it was password protected and she couldn't open it.

"Well, so much for that," Rhoda said.

"Don't give up so quick. Let me try to hack into it," Farah said. "I have a lot more time to play with it than you guys."

"Sure, feel free," said Rhoda. Taking the duty roster from her pocket, Rhoda read out the eight names. None of them sounded familiar. "I'll have a friend of mine in law enforcement run these names through the criminal database just to see what kind of people we're dealing with. Maybe there are some open warrants on some of them, and we can call in the cops and shut them down. And I want to thank you both for watching my back."



## CHAPTER 27

Desmond Castle told himself that he should have been commanding armies. He should have been making decisions that altered history and the course of nations. Like his heroes, Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler, he should be deciding the fates of millions. Instead, through the bad luck of his birth, he grew up the youngest of six boys in a poor family in Peel's Creek, South Carolina, with all the misery that that entailed. Desmond had to fight for everything, every toy, every mouthful, and every crumb of affection, and he usually lost. Desmond grew up angry, frustrated, and disappointed. That's what he expected from life, and that's exactly what he got.

He was a preacher's son. His father, the Reverend Elton Castle, preached the gospel to an impoverished congregation of born-again farmers. From his pulpit, he preached hellfire and damnation. And at home, as a result of his own frustrations, Reverend Castle beat the fear of God into young Desmond with the sort of brutality that can only come from true conviction. The result was a deeply flawed, psychologically warped individual. His deep hatred for his father became the bitter wellspring for Desmond's twisted world view.

Not a physically imposing man, Desmond Castle possessed that elusive and much maligned quality—charisma. He

could charm a crowd of people into opening their wallets and their minds. He could sugarcoat the hard edge of his bigotry with quotations from the holy book and make even the biggest skeptic shout hallelujah.

The founding of the LPA had been his highest achievement thus far, and even though he had only seven followers at the moment, he had no doubts that in time he would gather an army of true believers and rule the world. He was strong, he was Christian, and he was right; he knew in his heart of hearts that his time was coming. Until that blessed hour, though, he would have to content himself with what he had.

In his tiny world, Desmond Castle was commander-in-chief and absolute dictator. Better a big fish in a small pond, he would tell himself. Ever since founding the LPA seven years earlier, he had been amazed at the ease with which his stew of politics, religion, and intolerance attracted people and money. Sure, he only had seven followers today, but a couple of years ago, he had none. And tomorrow, well, who knew what tomorrow might bring.

The LPA received funding from several sources: larger and better known far rightwing groups, donations raised through the group's web site, book sales from fairs and expos, and the occasional armed robbery. But money was always a problem. There was never enough to cover expenses, let alone to promote the dreams of its leader.

That was why it came as such a happy surprise when an anonymous donor informed Desmond that he was pledging two hundred thousand dollars to the LPA. The money was his, the donor said, under three conditions: the first condition was to improve the security at the compound with state-of-the-art video surveillance; the second condition was to lease for a year a minimum of three thousand square feet of warehouse space somewhere in Green Bay and to contract for a long list of improvements; and the third condition was to maintain silence, to tell no one, including his own people, about the offer and to ask no questions about the donor. All expenses would be paid by the donor; the two hundred

thousand was for his personal use.

Desmond Castle jumped at the offer. A few days later he met secretly with the mystery donor's representative, a Mr. Omar. He was not surprised to see that Omar was a foreigner, probably an Arab. Castle loathed all foreigners, especially Arabs, but the suitcase full of money opened his eyes to the possibilities of diversity.

After taking the money, Castle set to work fulfilling his part of the bargain. He rented warehouse space in an empty building on Dean Street, a rundown industrial section on Green Bay's north side. He signed a lease for a year, using an assumed name. Next, he hired a contractor to install all the special equipment his patrons wanted—sinks, refrigerators, cases of laboratory glassware, animal cages, chemicals, microscopes, and who knew what all. He was a politician, not a goddamn scientist. But he bought everything on the list, forwarded the bills to a post office box, and assumed they were paid.

On the compound, he had the guardhouse rebuilt and the security system installed. He never told his followers anything about where the money came from. Alone in his bedroom at night, he would take the suitcase containing two hundred thousand dollars out of its hiding place just to reassure himself that it was real. Then, he would pray to his wrathful god, go to sleep, and dream his megalomaniacal dreams.

Day-to-day life in the compound had the rhythm of a military post. General Castle was post commander and field marshal. Making sure the commander's orders were executed was Sergeant Druer's job. Druer was the only person in the LPA with any real-life military experience. He claimed to have once been an Army Ranger, court marshaled out of the service with a "personality disorder" after six months of basic training. Directly under Sergeant Druer were two three-man squads, the red squad and the white squad. The two squads often squared off against each other in mock combat—paintball mostly—and took turns hunting, cooking meals, doing chores, and standing guard. Guard duty was univer-

sally despised as it meant hours of precious sleep time lost sitting in the new guardhouse, staring at the monitors.

Sergeant Druer frequently had to discipline the men for falling asleep on guard duty, and often for abandoning their post to get something to eat from the mess hall. So it was no surprise to anyone, except maybe General Castle, that the guardhouse was empty when the motorcade returned from the Expo. An angry Castle demanded that Sergeant Druer punish Private Beaty by making him watch the entire day's security tapes over again and assigning him extra kitchen and latrine duty. Sergeant Druer carried out his orders, and sat Private Beaty down before the monitors.

"Aw, Jesus, Sarge," lamented Beaty. "This really sucks. You know as well as I do nothing ever happens around this place."

"General's orders, Beaty. Just count your blessings he doesn't know you were sitting in his den watching TV and drinking beer. Besides, we were only gone about four hours."

"Four hours. Christ almighty, Sarge! A person could die of boredom watching that stuff for four hours."

"Well, you can watch it at double speed, but don't let the general know."

An hour later, Private Beaty choked on his soda as he watched an image of Rhoda sliding under the fence.

Desmond Castle rewound the tape and watched it for a second time. He watched the intruder slip under the fence and prowl around the compound. He glared daggers at Private Beaty. To Sergeant Druer, he said, "Tomorrow, I want you to take a work party and see that that gap in the fence is made secure." He froze the tape at a place where he had a good view of Rhoda's face.

"I saw this woman at the Expo yesterday. What the hell was her name? Smith. I doubt she gave me her real name. Anyway, print out this photo, Sergeant, and show it to the men. Let's see if anyone else recognizes her."

Sergeant Druer did as ordered and later that night he passed Rhoda's photo around the barracks. After the whistles, catcalls, and

stupid remarks, he got affirmative hits from the three hunters. He brought this news to Castle.

The next morning, Castle called Hanks, Shipman, and Dexter to his office. They saluted and stood at attention. Castle said, "At ease, men. Corporal Hanks, am I correct in understanding that this is the same woman game warden you had that run-in with a few days ago?"

"Yes, sir. That's her." said Hanks. Shipman and Dexter concurred.

"I don't suppose she told you her name, or whether she worked for the state or the feds?"

Private Shipman said, "I think she gave her name to Corporal Hanks. I remember they shook hands."

"Is this true, corporal? Did she introduce herself?"

"Yes, sir, she did, but for the life of me I can't remember her name," Hanks said with a shrug and a grin.

Sergeant Druer snapped, "You find this amusing, corporal? Maybe a few days in the can will change your attitude." The can was a small, windowless cell in the basement of the log house.

"No, sir. Sorry, sir. I'll try to remember."

Castle asked again, "Does anyone remember who she worked for?" Three heads shook no. Castle dismissed them and watched the video a third time while he thought of what to do.

He could have kicked himself for leaving the compound so undermanned. He really didn't have to go to that stupid, two-bit Expo, but he just couldn't resist strutting his stuff before those other pissant militias. He liked showing them what a real militia looked like. It did feel good, but was it really worth the hassle? Good thing he had ordered the new security system, though. That must make him look pretty smart. No one need ever know it wasn't even his idea.

How much of a problem was this break-in, really? Maybe it was even a good thing. It might get the troops serious about performing guard duty properly and keeping the office secure. Although now that he thought about it, it was he who left the of-

fice window unlocked. His cash was safe, however; he checked that first thing. That beautiful suitcase full of money gave him a warm glow all over. It looked like the intruder might have taken something off his desk, but he couldn't tell for sure. Even if she did swipe a CD or something, she didn't have the password. And even if she hacked her way into the disc, there was precious little there to incriminate him. The truth be told, the Lord's Patriot Army was a lot more dream than substance. So, maybe it wasn't such a crisis after all.

## CHAPTER 28

On Dean Street, the old warehouse that Desmond Castle rented for his unknown benefactor had been transformed into a crude but effective biological research lab. Three young Arab men in lab coats worked diligently at microscopes and centrifuges, growing cultures of avian flu virus.

It is no easy matter to grow viral cultures in a lab. Unlike bacteria, viruses require living tissue upon which to grow and multiply. Just creating and maintaining the underlying strata was complex biochemistry. The aim of their efforts was to modify the avian influenza virus, using genetic engineering techniques to make the bird-specific disease transmissible from human to human. A constantly mutating virus like influenza may eventually figure out how to go from birds to humans without any help, but these young men could not wait for that to happen naturally. They were in a hurry. Their God expected them to provide him with a weapon more powerful than any bomb—a disease that could infect an entire planet. They expected their God to protect the faithful, but they still used modern biohazard gear to protect themselves in the meantime.

The young scientists were actually growing two distinct viral strains: the exotic avian influenza and the common rhinovirus. The rhinovirus caused mankind's most easily transmissible disease—the common cold.

Their goal was to combine the lethality of bird flu with the contagion of the common cold. It was as ambitious as it was diabolical and if successful, would cause a pandemic that would leave many tens of millions dead. The fact that millions of their fellow Muslims would also die was considered God's will. But it was their will and dedication that was making this evil real.

Khalid, the project leader, told the others for the thousandth time, "If God wills it, we shall succeed." It was a credit to their faith and a good education that they had been able to overcome so many obstacles in this rather rudimentary lab. Using off-the-shelf components from many sources, they had prevailed. They sequenced the DNA from both viruses, isolated the receptors that allow the rhinovirus to penetrate the human lung, and managed to grow their hybridized creation in the lab.

Now the group was ready to test the latest iteration of their bio-weapon. Achmed donned a biohazard suit and entered the lab's high-level containment area. This sterile room had negative air pressure, an air lock, and special filtration equipment to keep the viruses from spreading. Today's test was to see if the newly modified virus could make the leap from an infected bird to a healthy primate. This was a crucial test. They had already established that their creation could travel through the bird population like wildfire, but if it could not cross the species barrier, it was useless as a weapon.

"If the last round of genetic splicing was successful," Khalid said, "and I pray that it was, our test monkey should be showing signs of sickness within twenty-four hours." Five hours later, the monkey was dead. The three scientists were jubilant. They praised their God over and over. They were doing his will.

Rhoda flattened out her crumpled copy of the overdue invoice and called the phone number on the letterhead. Using her best bookkeeper's voice she explained how she had received the late notice. "I must have lost the invoice," she said. "I'm very sorry, but you know, these things happen. Could you please fax me



a copy of the original invoice, and I'll see that it gets paid?"

"Oh, don't be sorry," said the company bookkeeper. "You all have been great customers. Every other one of Mr. Stancil's invoices has been paid on time. What's that fax number?"

A few minutes later, Rhoda had the invoice in her hands. Two months previously, the LPA spent sixty-two hundred dollars for: sixty pounds of viral growth medium, four dozen viral culture trays, high-quality filtration paper, DNA analyzer cups, and a gene splicing kit, all to be delivered to 179 Dean Street in Green Bay.

She looked on a street map of Green Bay. Dean Street was in a commercial district north of the city. Probably a warehouse, she thought. She had studied enough biology to recognize that the equipment ordered from the supplier was pretty sophisticated stuff. She was about to call Zayeed and tell him about the laboratory when Gladys called her on the office intercom.

"It's the bird lab for you on line one. Dr. Barnes, I think."

"Deerwalker here."

"Ah yes, Miss Deerwalker. This is Gordon Barnes at the Migratory Bird Lab. I just got off the phone with Dr. Merribone at the CDC. He said they ran extensive tests and found your strain of bird flu to be new to science. In fact, they've named it GB001. The GB is for Green Bay. Good work there. Merribone said it's a mutation. Very fast acting and much more deadly to birds than anything they've ever encountered with previous strains but still not readily transmissible to humans. Good thing for all of us, hey?"

Rhoda thanked Dr. Barnes and hung up the phone. She understood what the CDC researchers just said, but she could not shake the feeling that they were missing something. The CDC didn't know about the possible LPA connection. Her instincts were screaming at her to resolve the matter once and for all. She put a call into Zayeed but couldn't contact him on his cell phone, so she called his house and Farah answered.

"Hi, Rhoda. I'm glad you called. Remember that computer disc you found? I unlocked it! I'm so proud of myself. Anyway, there's a ton of stuff on it. You might want to come over and pick

it up so you can read through it and see what on it might be important.”

“Wow, that’s terrific, Farah. I had no idea you were such a hacker. I’ll try to come by on Wednesday to pick it up. You’ll have to tell me how you did it. Oh, and would you ask Zayeed to call me when he gets in? Thanks.”

“Sure thing. Come early Wednesday and stay for dinner. I’m making a curry.”

“That’ll be great. I’ll bring dessert.”

A few minutes later, Zayeed called. “I’m in the car, heading your way. Did you call the lab supply company?”

“I did, and they had a load of biotech stuff delivered to an address here in town. A Mr. Stancil placed the order, probably a phony name. I think the address is a warehouse. Want to drive over and take a look with me?”

“Another breaking and entering caper? This is getting to be a habit with you.”

“Who said anything about breaking and entering? There’s nothing illegal about driving around a building and looking in the windows. If somebody’s home, maybe we can talk to them.”

“Okay, Rhoda, I’ll be there in a half an hour. Wait for me at the office, and I’ll pick you up. We’ll have a look at this warehouse together.”

When Zayeed arrived, Rhoda showed him the invoice. She said, “The bookkeeper at the supply house told me that this was just the latest in a series of purchases by Mr. Stancil. All their other bills were paid on time.”

“There’s stuff here for culturing viruses and sequencing DNA,” Zayeed said.

“Someone knows what they’re doing,” Rhoda said. “I’d really be surprised if those goons in the LPA were bright enough to use this stuff.”

“Well, let’s go and see what we can see,” Zayeed said as they climbed into his old Wildlife Service pickup.

The building at 179 Dean Street turned out to be a featureless brick warehouse on a block of similar buildings. There were no ground-level windows except a small square one in the metal front door. The door was locked tight, and all Rhoda could see was a small tiled entrance area and a deserted office. Around back there were a couple of loading docks, a fire escape, a Dumpster, and a parking lot with a single car in it, a five-year-old Honda Civic. On the loading dock there was another locked metal door. Rhoda asked Zayeed to drop her off. She wanted to check out the car and the Dumpster. She asked him to drive around the neighborhood and come back for her in fifteen minutes. “I don’t want to leave you,” Zayeed said.

“Please, Zayeed, I’m not going to do anything foolish. If I’m spotted looking through their garbage, I’ll have a better chance of talking my way out of it if it is just me, and besides, this way you can get help if there is trouble.” Rhoda grabbed a pair of rubber gloves and a respirator and jumped from the truck before Zayeed could mount any objections. “Come on, Zayeed, cheer up. Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Please be careful, Rhoda,” Zayeed said as he drove away.

The Honda was locked. She could see an Arabic newspaper on the back seat. The Dumpster proved to be more revealing than the car, and a whole lot more fragrant. Rhoda climbed in through the small sliding door on the side. The smell was almost unbearable. There were several black plastic garbage bags on the Dumpster floor. One of the bags was swollen like a balloon. The air was thick with flies. She slipped on her respirator and gloves and slit open the inflated bag. She dumped its contents on the Dumpster floor. The source of the stench turned out to be the rotting bodies of lab animals—several birds and a monkey—each in a plastic bag of its own. She threw the empty garbage bag away and slit open another. This bag contained discarded lab supplies—electrophoresis trays, filter papers, micro-pipettes and other disposable items used in bioresearch. Mixed with the equipment were copies of technical

magazines and papers in English and Arabic. She noticed a paper on viral receptors, another on DNA sequencing. There were some papers with Arabic writing, which she put in her pocket to show to Zayeed later.

She couldn't wait to get into the fresh air and was about to climb out of the stinking metal can when the back door to the warehouse opened and she heard men's voices. She crawled back into a corner of the Dumpster. The container's door went dark for a moment as a black garbage bag was stuffed in. It fell right next to her. This was the second time in less than a week that I have had a garbage bag tossed at me, she thought. So much for the romance of the great outdoors.

She peeked out and saw four men get into the Honda. She recognized them—the three young men from the mosque and Mullah Omar. What was the mullah doing here? The Honda pulled out and reached the gate just as Zayeed pulled in. Both cars stopped, facing each other for a few seconds, until recognition dawned. Omar ducked down behind the driver's seat. The Arab driver and front passenger got out of the Honda and walked toward Zayeed's truck. Zayeed didn't like the odds, and not knowing what to expect, he threw his old truck into reverse, made a tire-squealing hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, and sped away. The two Arabs jumped back into the Honda and took off in pursuit. Zayeed took his first turn on two wheels. The old truck's tailgate banged open, and a toolbox fell into the road with a clatter, spilling wrenches and screwdrivers everywhere. The Honda followed close behind, slowed only slightly by flying tools.

Zayeed could see his pursuers in his rear view mirror. Omar, in the back seat, had his cell phone out and was punching at the keypad. Zayeed took a hard right and then jogged left with no idea where he was going. Tires squealed, and the old pickup smoked and wheezed. The Honda was tight on his rear bumper, though the overloaded little car was hard pressed to keep up. The Arabs took a left turn too fast and sideswiped a parked car. Sparks flew and car alarms blared.

After a few minutes of randomly zigging and zagging, Zayeed decided to head for a busy street, where he hoped he might lose his pursuers in traffic or, perhaps, attract the attention of a Green Bay traffic cop. By the time he reached Byram Road, the Honda was gone and the chase was over. As exciting as it was, the whole thing probably lasted five minutes. It was just as well; the old pickup was starting to overheat and the clutch was none too happy with all the rough handling. Zayeed drove slowly back to the warehouse to look for Rhoda.

From her hiding place in the Dumpster, Rhoda watched Zayeed peel out of the parking lot with the Arabs in hot pursuit. She had to laugh at the grade B movie-ness of it all. Here she was hiding in the garbage while Zayeed lived out his car-chase fantasy. This was a memory to savor.

While waiting for Zayeed to return, Rhoda climbed on the top of the Dumpster and with a jump, reached the bottom-most rung on the fire escape ladder. She pulled the ladder down and climbed up. The ladder passed one of the big warehouse windows before reaching the roof. From the fire escape landing, Rhoda could look down into the interior of the warehouse. What she saw was a well-equipped, modern biological research laboratory. In evidence were computers, lab animals, microscopes and tons of expensive looking high tech apparatus.

The window offered no way in, and when she reached the roof, she discovered that the door there was locked. Looking down at the street, she saw Zayeed's truck coming back for her, so she hurried down the fire escape to meet him. She got in the cab beside him; they gave each other high fives and then burst out laughing. They laughed all the way to Rhoda's apartment, where Zayeed dropped her off and then went home. Rhoda changed out of her stinking clothes and drew a hot bath, chuckling to herself the whole time.

## CHAPTER 29

Not everyone connected with Rhoda and Zayeed's latest adventure was so amused. To Salim al Barzani, this breach in security threatened a very delicate and carefully planned operation. This bumbling forest warden, or whatever he called himself, had suddenly become a problem. Perhaps not a big problem, at least not yet, but something that must be dealt with before it became a big problem. You didn't fight the infidel in his homeland by being careless. In Salim's worldview, there were only good people—devout Sunni Muslims, or bad people—everyone else.

Salim al Barzani had been fighting since he was a ten-year-old who could throw a rock. First, in the crowded streets of Gaza City with gangs of street kids, he would harass the Israeli soldiers in the intifada. As he grew, the rocks were replaced as weapons, first with guns and then with bombs. He was arrested many times, and it was in the Israeli prisons that he got his true education. There, he met the holy warriors who had goals much more far reaching than merely killing Israelis.

Back on the streets, his bravery and devotion caught the attention of resistance leaders, who sent him for training in Jordan. Before long, he was downing Russian helicopters in Afghanistan and planting bombs in European restaurants. He fought alongside many great martyrs in the struggle to keep the Holy Land free of infidels. As a result, he had known only blood and struggle all his

life, and the fact that he was still alive and breathing only reaffirmed his faith that God had special plans for him.

After four decades of killing with guns and bombs, Salim had a revelation. Never one to read much or to study, he stumbled upon a magazine article on weapons of mass destruction. He was immediately captivated by their tremendous killing potential. He was especially drawn to the section on biological weapons, marveling at how a handful of powdered material could spread death to an entire population. He began to read more on the subject and learned that biological research had progressed to the point where scientists had gained an understanding of the chemistry of life itself: how to manipulate and engineer the very chemistry of the cell and how to modify pathogens into weapons. This was a thrilling concept, and Salim believed that Allah had granted him this vision of a weapon so powerful that it would purify the world.

Why then, he thought, should he spend his days killing unbelievers a few at a time when, with a little study and a few years of patient planning, he could father a weapon that would unleash God's justice on millions. Since that day six, no seven, years ago, he had dedicated his life to achieving that aim. He studied and trained with a fierce, single-minded intensity. He cajoled his reluctant masters into backing his plan. And by the grace of an almighty God, he found the means put his plan into action — to equip and train in secret a select group of talented, dedicated jihadis to develop this most glorious weapon. What a beautiful thing, he thought, to employ God's innocent creations to eliminate his sinful ones. Let the virus be God's cleansing sword. Did not the Q'ran say that the infidel should fear God's wrathful fire? Perhaps the holy book meant the fire of a fever. This kind of thinking made him feel strong. Surely, he was doing God's will.

Once permission to proceed was granted, almost seven years ago, the pieces of the great plan had fallen into place. With the patient planning and foresight that makes radical Islamic terrorism so difficult to counter, eight of the Arab world's best and brightest young men were culled from the camps, schools, and

madrases of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine. These eight young men, already convinced of the rightness of their cause, were eager to give their lives to its advancement. Any one of them would gladly have strapped on an explosive vest and walked into a crowded restaurant anywhere in the world.

Instead, Salim offered them a different kind of martyrdom. He told them they had been selected to continue their studies. But this time, they would not be studying the Koran. Instead, they would attend some of the world's great universities and study biology, biochemistry, genetics, and molecular biology. They would absorb all that these great institutions had to teach, and then they would be brought together and provided with a laboratory of their own. There, they would put their learning to the service of jihad.

The funding for the boys' education and for the laboratory came through the usual shady channels of Islamic charities and scholarships for overseas study. The boys were sent in pairs to four universities — two in Europe and two in the United States. It was thought that if they had each other to talk with they could better resist the temptations of living in the decadent West. Some attrition was expected, but Salim was surprised and quite unnerved when he lost five of the original eight: two were lost in alcohol-related automobile accidents, one died from an overdose of drugs, one dropped out of school and was thought to be working for a large pharmaceutical company, and most vexing of all, one fell in with a group of theater majors and ran off to Los Angeles with a Jewish man.

The three men who remained went on to graduate school and earned advanced degrees. Salim's plan was beautiful in its simplicity. All it required was patience and a mastery of the science that was revealing the molecular building blocks of creation. The plan was long range and the payoff huge, and the beauty of it was that the infidels themselves were providing the key to their own undoing. When the planes crashed and the buildings fell on September 11, almost three thousand unbelievers were dead. When Salim's three jihadis were finished, tens of millions would fall and with their deaths would come an end to the corruption of the West



and victory for the true faith.

Salim's plan was in its final critical phase. Having assembled his small cell of dedicated men, he brought his trusted lieutenant, Omar Calipha, to the United States on a tourist visa, now long expired. Omar's loyalty was unquestioned, and Salim assigned him the mission of finding and setting up their base of operations in the United States. Omar's instructions were to find a small to medium sized city with a university, a small police presence, and enough Muslims already living there so that the arrival of others would not arouse suspicion. In his wisdom, Omar selected Green Bay, Wisconsin, in the very heart of America.

The city proved to be a good choice, sophisticated enough so that a Middle Eastern man would not draw much attention, yet small enough not to have a large FBI or police presence. It was a place far from the terrorist hysteria of the large cities, yet diverse enough to have a few Muslim families. The city had a university and a small but usable warehouse district. There was no mosque then, but Omar started one. Once the cell settled in, Omar set to work finding Americans to bribe. Salim needed some gullible citizens to use as fronts for purchases, leases, and legal matters. These Americans were to provide an extra layer of protection in case the authorities got curious.

Omar found Desmond Castle and the LPA. How he found them, Salim never quite understood, but Castle proved greedy and willing enough. Once the matter of money was negotiated, Castle signed the lease and outfitted the lab as directed. Best of all, Castle kept his mouth shut.

In many ways, Castle, too, was a jihadi. He, too, hated the government and the decadent society in which he lived. He, too, prayed that his God would strike down his enemies, and he trained as a soldier to fight and survive the coming struggle. Salim felt a strong kinship with the LPA. Too bad Castle was an unbeliever; he might have made a good jihadi. But even as an unbeliever and an American, Desmond Castle was still useful to the cause, and like many Americans he was in love with money and easily bought. So

far, Castle had acted honorably, and at least until today, everything had been going according to plan.

Salim reflected on the events of the day, his analytical mind assessing the threats and deciding on what actions to take. Omar and his team had the misfortune to run into that young forest warden fellow, someone Omar had often seen at the mosque on Fridays. This meant that forest warden had also recognized Omar. This was bad. It was only the second time Omar had been to the lab. Salim didn't want Omar to be associated with it in any way. Then, to make matters worse, Khalid, the cowboy, chases after him. Fortunately, Salim managed to call off the chase and calm the situation down. By now, Khalid and the scientists were back in their quarters and Omar was waiting for him at the mosque. They were all waiting for him, Salim, to decide how to handle this breach of security. There was only one way. Nothing must be allowed to jeopardize the mission. First, they must find this forest warden and eliminate him.

Just a few short hours before he found himself hurtling through the streets in pursuit of the infidel, Mullah Omar's day had started off bright and full of promise. Omar was in his office, which office occupied one of the two small bedrooms above the mosque. The other room was where Omar slept. That room was a cheerless place, almost bare, containing only a blanket on the floor for a bed and a small suitcase for his few belongings. Its lack of adornment and furniture reminded him that he was a warrior. He lived without comfort in a land of too much comfort.

He had just learned that his bright young scientists had made a major breakthrough. Khalid had called only moments before and asked him to come to the lab for a demonstration. He agreed, of course, but first he would thank the God who made all things possible. Omar prayed alone, facing Mecca, on his office floor. He gave thanks for the way the great plan was progressing. Soon his prayers were interrupted by a knocking at the door. It was Achmed come to take him to the lab. Omar did not drive.

“You look pleased with yourself, brother,” said Omar showing a rare flash of good humor.

“I think you will be pleased after you see what we have to show you.” Achmed’s high spirits were infectious.

At the lab, Achmed showed Omar the caged monkey in the bio-containment room. “You see that monkey in there?” Achmed asked.

“He doesn’t look too well,” Omar said.

“That is because he has caught the sickness from a bird that died a few hours ago. Khalid will now put a healthy monkey in the room with the sick one. What we have done, praise God, is taken this bird disease and made it infectious to primates. That was a big hurdle, making our germ leap between species. Now it is only a small step from monkeys to people, medically speaking.”

“And will the disease travel from monkeys to men?” asked Omar?

“We are pretty certain that it will,” replied Achmed.

“Pretty certain? We have to be completely certain.” Omar turned to watch the demonstration inside the containment room.

Khalid, in full biohazard gear, held up a wire cage for Omar’s inspection. Inside was a frightened spider monkey. The space-suited Khalid entered the lab’s bio-containment air lock. He put the cage with the healthy monkey alongside the sick one and left the room. Jamil, the third scientist, waited until Khalid was back in the air lock before turning a valve and spraying Khalid’s suit with a strong disinfectant. Khalid finally exited the air lock and removed the suit.

For the next two hours, the men watched as the sick monkey got weaker and eventually just lay on the floor of its cage, wheezing heavily. In little more than an hour, the healthy monkey began coughing and sneezing. Its nose began to discharge copious amounts of mucus. Achmed said, “In a few hours, it, too, will be dead. Our virus is a very effective killer and acts much faster than we expected.”

“What else remains to be done?” Omar asks.

“There is one more test,” said Achmed. “What works in birds and monkeys does not always work in humans. That is the final test.”

“And,” asked Omar watching the monkey grow noticeably weaker, “assuming it works on humans, how long before we have enough virus to use against our enemies?”

“We have enough virus, already. We can pack it up and begin operations in a few hours,” Khalid answered.

“God is great,” said Omar in Arabic. “Now take me back to the mosque. I must tell Salim this news.”

Jamil got back into the biohazard suit and entered the containment room a second time. He gathered up the dead monkey and euthanized the dying one. He stuffed the small corpses into plastic bags and sealed them tight. Then he put all of the lab’s garbage into a black plastic garbage bag. Again, he was decontaminated, and the four men left the lab.

Once outside, Jamil tossed the garbage bag into the Dumpster, where Rhoda was hiding, and they all piled into the Honda. They were just leaving the parking lot when they nearly ran into Zayeed’s pickup truck. In an instant they all recognized each other. Omar belatedly ducked down hoping he wasn’t seen. Khalid and Jamil got out of the car to see what Zayeed wanted.

Achmed said to Omar, “Wasn’t that the man we met at the mosque last week, the one asking all those questions?”

Zayeed saw the two men approaching, and the chase was on. Omar dialed Salim to tell him their cover was blown and to ask for instructions. Salim told him to break off the chase and have the scientists drop him off at the mosque. He would meet him there.

Salim paced up and down in the big room where the Friday evening services were held. “You say you recognized this intruder? Do you know who he was?”

“He comes to the mosque most Fridays,” said Omar.

“So he is a Muslim. What do you know about him?”

“Only his name and that he is married and he works for

the government as a protector of animals.” Both men shook their heads at the inscrutable ways of the West. Imagine a Muslim being a protector of animals.

“So what is this animal policeman doing snooping around our lab?” asked Salim.

“That is the question,” Omar answered.

“No,” said Salim, “the question is what are we going to do about it?”

“I do have some good news, Salim,” said Omar in an effort to change the mood.

Salim grunted, “Some good news would be welcome.”

“I was at the facility today to witness a demonstration. Our young scientists have made great progress. In spite of all odds, with God’s help, they have triumphed. I watched one monkey infect another. In a matter of hours, the monkey was dying. We are so close, Salim. There remains but one final test, and that is to see if the new virus can infect a human being. Not everything that makes monkeys sick has the same effect on people.”

“This I know. “Suddenly, Salim brightened and said with a smile, “But surely you must see the hand of God in all this, my friend. We need to test our virus on a man, and Allah delivers this animal protector into our hands. I see how we can, as the Americans say, kill two birds with one bush. Tell me, Omar, when this person joined the mosque, did he not fill out a form?”

“Yes, yes of course. I have such forms in my office. I’ll bring them down.” In a few moments, they had Zayeed’s name and address. Omar said, “He lists his employer as the US Fish and Wildlife Service/Enforcement Division. Does this mean he is some sort of policeman?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Salim. “He is not the sort of policeman we need to worry about. We shall remove him, and our problem is contained.”

## CHAPTER 30

It was Wednesday evening, and Rhoda was having dinner at Farah and Zayeed's apartment. Rhoda and Zayeed were entertaining Farah with tales of their adventure at the lab. Zayeed re-lived his Steve McQueen moment to great amusement. Rhoda, who was there to pick up the computer disc, related her fragrant experience in the Dumpster. During a pause in the conversation, she asked Farah how she managed to figure out the password that unlocked the disc.

Now it was Farah's turn to boast, "It's not that much of a story, really. It was easier than you think. I tried most of the usual things like birthdays and initials. I tried variations on Lord's Patriot Army, Desmond Castle, and Misty Lake. When none of that worked, I tried putting myself inside Mister Castle's head."

"I'm sure you just slipped right into the head of an infantile, abused, homophobic, white supremacist, xenophobic megalomaniac," laughed Rhoda.

"Well, I read his biography from the pamphlet," continued Farah, "and I thought of what in his childhood might still have meaning for him. So I tried his birthplace, Peel's Creek, and that was it."

"Bravo!"

"Well done." Zayeed and Rhoda cheered and applauded.

Farah stood up and bowed deeply. “What a day this was. How about some more of that excellent wine?” Zayeed refilled their glasses and they beamed and toasted the way good friends do. Zayeed got to his feet and said, “I am a truly lucky fellow. I have two beautiful women in my life and a child on the way. I don’t see how life could get any better. God has been good to me.”

At about the same time at the LPA compound, the white squad was straightening up the mess hall after dinner. Sgt. Druer was urging them to “hustle it up so we can get out of here.”

In the log house, Desmond Castle’s phone rang. He picked up and immediately recognized the slightly accented voice of Calipha, his benefactor. Castle slipped into his most unctuous manner. He said, “Mr. Calipha, how good to hear from you again. Tell me, what can I do for you?”

“Yes, Mr. Castle. I have a small problem, which I think you and your organization are uniquely qualified to resolve. Naturally, there will be a substantial reward for your services.”

“Always a pleasure to serve you, sir.”

“Yes, well, it seems there is a person, a man, living out near you, a forest ranger or game warden or something. We, or should I say my partners and I, would like very much to speak to this person, and since he is unwilling to meet with us voluntarily, I thought you might be able to persuade him to see reason. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Of course, I understand you quite well, Mr. Calipha. Do you have a name and address that we can use?”

“I have both.”

“And what exactly would you like us to do with this person?”

“I would like you to pick him up and deliver him to an address I shall supply,” said Omar.

“Sounds like we’re going to need at least a three-man team to help persuade this fellow to come with us. What did he do, anyway?”

“Our reasons are our own, Mr. Castle. Can you do this simple task or no? Perhaps I should call another party.”

“There’s no need to call anyone else, Mr. Calipha. The LPA can certainly take care of a small matter like this. You mentioned a fee?”

“You will be paid ten thousand dollars upon delivery. I am faxing the relevant names and addresses to you as we speak.”

“Here they come now.” Castle read the name from the sheet. “You want this Zayeed Hasan delivered to this address in Green Bay? When would you like this done?”

“The sooner the better. We are prepared to accept delivery late into the night. You may call me at the number on the fax when you have him, and I will be sure to have someone there to pick him up.”

A few minutes later, Castle called Sgt. Druer to his office. “I have a mission for you, Sergeant. Take two of your most reliable men into Boulder Lake. Go to this address and pick up this man.” Castle handed Druer Zayeed’s name and address. “I’m not expecting any trouble, but draw side arms and be prepared for anything. I don’t have to tell you to be careful and not to leave behind anything that can be traced back to this organization. You have your orders soldier. Dismissed.”

Almost reflexively, Sgt. Druer saluted, but before he turned to leave he got an anxious look on his face and said to Castle, “Permission to speak frankly, sir?”

“Permission granted, Sergeant,” said castle warily.

“Okay, General, let’s can the soldier crap for a second and talk about this assignment. You’re asking me and my men to commit a felony here; kidnapping, I think it’s called. Now, you know me and the boys would do most anything for our cause, but I think you owe us an explanation, a reason to risk our necks. How does snatching this Hasan guy help the LPA?”

It suddenly dawned on Desmond Castle that the military fiction of the Lord’s Patriot Army was built on little more than the



trust between him and his men. They weren't a real army. There was no code of military justice he could use to coerce these men into doing his will. There was only the dream of some far-off glorious future that he'd been selling. What was the LPA, anyway, but a ragtag bunch of misfits and misguided losers. So, he cleared his throat and did his best to give Calvin Druer a dishonest answer to his very honest question. "Sure, Cal, that's a fair question, and it deserves a straight answer. So I'm going to level with you. We're being tested. If the LPA can pull this off, well, the sky's the limit. Now, I realize that to you this looks rather sudden and seems to be coming out of nowhere, but there are things going on of which you know nothing and this man Hasan is a part of them."

"What things? A part of what?" asked Druer. "If we're putting our lives and liberties on the line, I think we have a right to know."

"Sure, Cal. Since we're speaking man to man. What I'm about to tell you, though, is top secret and I'd rather you didn't share it with the men, but during the last few months the LPA has attracted the attention of a rich and powerful group, the International Christian Brotherhood. This group is well funded and well connected. They've infiltrated into the top echelons of the US government. Anyway, they like the work we're doing and want us to join them in an alliance. This is big stuff, Cal, and a great opportunity. If we do a few small jobs for them, they promise to send money and recruits our way."

Castle was on a roll and getting into the fantasy he was spinning. His voice began to take on the singsong cadence of the preacher, and he turned all his persuasive charm on Druer. "In a few months, I see the LPA and you, Cal, playing a big role in the second American revolution. We'll be building another barracks, maybe two. You'll have twenty or thirty men under you. Sergeant Major Druer, how does that sound? You'll have a staff of your own and an army to train. There are big changes coming for the LPA, and I won't forget those who were with me from the start."

"So this Zayeed Hasan is someone this Christian Brother-

hood wants kidnapped?” asked Druer.

“Let’s just say that this Hasan fellow is standing in the way of this alliance and if we can deliver him unharmed, it will be a feather in our cap. We can join the Brotherhood as equals. I have every faith that you can do this. You can tell the boys the general will reward their loyalty. There’s a thousand bucks in it for you to share with the others or not; I’ll leave that decision to you.”

By the time Sergeant Druer was through absorbing this load of bullshit and flattery, he was once again the loyal soldier. His head was filled with the visions of the military career he always wanted but never had. He saluted smartly and told Castle, “You can count on me, sir.” He did an about face and left to assemble his team.

Druer called Corporal Hanks and Private Shipman out of the barracks where they were relaxing after dinner. He told them to draw side arms from the arms locker and meet him at one of the big black Suburbans. While they were arming themselves, he gathered the supplies he thought he would need. He found rope, duct tape, and a tarp and tossed them in the back of the car. A few minutes later, they were pulling out of the compound. Private Shipman was driving.

“Where to, Sarge?” he asked.

“The general wants us to pick up a guy in Boulder Lake. His name is...” He unfolded his paper and read “Zayeed Hasan, Box 61, Tye River Road.”

“Sounds like an Arab,” said Shipman.

“What’s this guy do?” Hank asked.

“It’s all very hush-hush. General said pick him up and bring him to this address in Green Bay. Then, we hand him over to some people the general wants to impress.”

Being of a practical nature Hanks asked, “So what’s our plan, Sarge? When we get there, I mean.”

“Well I figure we ought to first locate the guy’s house and see what’s going on. Maybe snatch him coming or going.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” said Shipman.

In a few minutes, they covered the twenty miles from Misty Lake to Boulder Lake. Then it took them another five or six minutes to find the Tye River Road and Zayeed and Farah's house. The house was a tiny two-bedroom cottage on a side road a few blocks from the lake. An old Toyota sedan sat in the driveway. It was dusk and difficult to tell if anyone was home or not. They drove past a couple of times and finally parked where they had a good view of the driveway. They settled in to wait.

They were waiting about twenty minutes when Private Shipman said, "I could sure use a pee and a snack, Sarge. How's about I walk back to that little store we passed and pick us up some munchies?"

"Okay, Shipman, good idea. Bring me back a coffee, two sugars. You want anything, Hanks?"

Hanks said, "Coffee for me too, black, and a donut."

They gave Shipman some money, and he walked off down the road. Druer lit a cigarette as he and Hanks continued their watch. Hanks said by way of conversation, "You know, Sarge, kidnapping's a pretty serious offense, a major felony in this state. We could get life in prison for this caper."

"I'm aware. Castle has sound reasons for this. He's not doing this on a whim. And he promises big rewards for all of us." Druer rolled down his window a crack and tossed out his cigarette.

"What kind of rewards?" asked Hanks.

"Oh, you know, promotions, that kind of thing."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then two things happened simultaneously: An old pickup truck came down the road and pulled into the driveway of number 61 and the grass and brush alongside the black Suburban suddenly burst into flame. Pulling into his driveway, Zayeed noticed the strange car parked on his street but didn't think too much about it. What got him excited, though, was seeing flames and smoke spring up alongside it, the result of Druer's casually tossed cigarette.

Zayeed leaped from the cab of his truck, grabbed a small

fire extinguisher, and made a dash for the fire. Hanks and Druer saw the fire too and jumped out of the vehicle. They started flailing at the blaze with their shirts. Zayeed applied his extinguisher, and the fire was soon out.

Panting and relieved, Zayeed said, “Whew, that was too close. It’s been so dry lately anything can set off a fire. You guys toss a cigarette or something?”

“Nah, not us,” Druer said. “We’re careful with fire.”

“What are you fellows doing here, anyway? And why the guns?” Zayeed said, noticing the side arms for the first time. “You guys cops?”

“FBI,” said Hanks before Druer could think of a reply.

“What are you doing here?” Zayeed asked again.

“We’re looking for a Zayeed Hasan,” said Druer.

“I’m Hasan,” said Zayeed. “That’s my house over there, in fact, and that’s my wife,” Zayeed gestured with his head at Farah, standing in the driveway.

Farah called to Zayeed, “is everything all right, Zayeed?”

“Everything’s fine. Stay there honey. I’ll be home in a minute.” To Druer and Hanks, he said, “You say you’re FBI? I find that hard to believe,” Zayeed said looking, at the assortment of Nazi tattoos covering Druer’s body. Prominent among them was a large skull with a bloody dagger in its eye. “I’d like to see some identification,” Zayeed said, backing up a step as the men advanced.

“We’re undercover,” said Hanks. Zayeed took another step back.

“Aw, fuck this shit,” said Druer, pulling out his gun, “Just get in the fucking car before I blow your head off. If you try to get cute, I’ll shoot that pretty wife of yours, too.”

Hanks and Druer grabbed Zayeed and forced him into the Suburban. Druer got behind the wheel and drove while Hanks tied and gagged Zayeed with duct tape.

Farah watched the abduction of her husband with increasing horror. At first she was stunned and paralyzed with fear. Then she turned and ran into the house, locked the front door behind her,

and continued into their bedroom. She ransacked their closet, looking for Zayeed's old back-up revolver, which she found in a shoebox on the top shelf. She couldn't find any ammunition for it but took it outside with her anyway. Zayeed and the black Suburban were gone. Only Zayeed's old pickup and some smoldering brush remained. She went back in the house and called the police. Then, she called Rhoda.

Hanks and Druer were giddy from their adrenaline rush. They high-fived each other repeatedly and cheered and crowed at how cool it was and how smoothly it went. They were several miles down the road heading into Green Bay when Druer gave himself a dope slap on the forehead and said, "Oh shit, we forgot Shipman."

For his part, Private Shipman was walking back from the general store with a bag of coffee and snacks. When he arrived back at the Hasan house, he saw a charred spot where the Suburban used to be and an old pickup truck in the driveway. He was at a loss for what to do so he sat in Zayeed's truck sipping coffee and waited for his team to come and pick him up.

On realizing they left one of their team behind, Hanks and Druer made a U-turn and headed back the way they had come. They were just nearing the general store at Boulder Lake when a Wisconsin State Police car and a county sheriff's car, both with sirens blaring and lights flashing, sped past them and made the turn onto Tye River Road.

They realized it was too late to rescue Shipman, so they made another U-turn in the store parking lot and headed to Green Bay for the second time. They placed a reluctant call to Castle and told him the news.

"You left a man behind?" an incredulous Castle asked.

"Yes sir, I'm afraid it was unavoidable," a cringing Druer replied.

"But we completed the mission."

"Well thank God for small favors. We'll take this up when you get back." Castle was furious about losing Shipman, but there

was nothing to be done about it now. He told Druer and Hanks to proceed with the delivery. The rendezvous point was an abandoned gas station in a derelict part of town. Castle made sure they knew the address and how to get there. Then, he called Omar and told him that the package was on its way.

## CHAPTER 31

Rhoda reacted immediately to Farah's call. She scrambled into her truck and headed to Boulder Lake as quickly as she could. On the way, she put in a call to Terry Winter and left a message on his answering machine. When she got to Farah's, there was still a county police car parked out front. She could just make out the silhouette of a man in the backseat. A county cop leaned against the car, smoking. Rhoda introduced herself to the local cop and asked him, "Who's the guy in the car?"

The cop said, "We found him hangin' around the scene. Sheriff thought he might be involved in the snatch. The kid hasn't said anything one way or the other. We're holdin' him until the FBI gets here. The sheriff's inside interviewing the lady. The state cops just left."

"Mind if I take a look at him?" Rhoda asked.

"Be my guest."

Rhoda opened the car's front door a crack so the dome light came on. There, she saw the sullen face of Private Shipman glaring back at her. She told the cop, "Yeah, I know this guy. I even have his name somewhere in my notebook. Hang on a sec, and I'll dig it out." She dug a small notebook out of her cargo pants and thumbed through its pages. "Here it is. He's either Clarence Shipman or Ralph Dexter. I caught them hunting illegally about a week ago. I

never did get straight answer which one was which. One thing I do know, though, he belongs to the local militia, the LPA.”

“Well, that’s interesting. I’m sure the sheriff will be glad to hear it.” He leaned into the car. “So, which one are you, son, Shipman or Dexter?” The sullen Shipman just shook his head and looked at the floor.

Rhoda knocked on Farah’s door. Sheriff Boyd answered and asked her to state her business, but Farah saw it was Rhoda and came running over. “It’s all right, Sheriff. This is my friend. Thank you for coming, Rhoda. I don’t know what I’m going to do. Why would anyone want to harm Zayeed? Oh, Rhoda, I’m so afraid.”

When they were inside, Farah told Rhoda about the abduction, how scared she was, and how worried. Rhoda comforted her and told her she had a pretty good idea where Zayeed was and who took him.

Farah turned to Sheriff Boyd and said, “Did you hear that? She knows where he is. You can rescue him tonight.”

Sheriff Boyd told her, “If you have any information, save it for the feds. This case involves a federal agent; it’s an FBI matter. Totally out of my jurisdiction.”

“But Sheriff,” Rhoda said, “that kid you have in the car out front. He’s a member of the LPA. You know, the Lords Patriot Army. That’s who took Zayeed.”

“All the more reason to wait for the feds,” replied the sheriff. “I ain’t about to tangle with no crazy militia.”

Now it was Farah’s turn to sound off. “Look, Sheriff, I appreciate your coming over here and trying to help, and I don’t want to tell you how to do your job, but...”

“Now listen here, both of you,” said the sheriff, pointing a finger at the two women. “Just because you recognized that boy out there in the car doesn’t mean that I oughta go bustin’ into the LPA compound with guns ablazin’. And it certainly don’t mean we’re gonna find your husband just sittin’ there awaitin’ to be rescued. We’ll just wind up gettin’ someone kilt. Better to wait for the



FBI. They know how to handle these crazy cult people. Like they did at Ruby Ridge and with them Branch Davidians. I just have a couple of deputies, and this ain't my fight."

Rhoda asked the sheriff, "When is the FBI supposed to get here?"

"The state cops called them about forty minutes ago. They're comin' up from Madison. I 'spect they'll be another couple three hours yet."

"Zayeed could be dead by then," said Farah.

"More'n likely they're lookin' for a ransom," said Sheriff Boyd. "If they wanted to kill him, they coulda done it right here hours ago. Leastwise, that's my experience with kidnappers."

Turning to Farah, Rhoda said, "I'm going to the compound. I'll draw a map. Give it to the FBI when they get here. I may not be able to do much, but maybe I can mess up their plans."

Farah broke down in tears, "Rhoda, be careful. It's too dangerous. What if they capture you?"

Rhoda scribbled directions to the compound, gave them to Farah, and hugged her goodbye. She said so long to the sheriff and headed for her car. She had no idea how she might get into the LPA compound and no plan even if she did, but she was driven by friendship and the terrible gnawing feeling that it was she who had gotten Zayeed into this mess, so she better do something to get him out of it.

On the way to the compound, Rhoda called Terry Winter again to tell him what she was doing. Once before, he pulled strings for her and managed to get the FBI moving. Maybe he could do it again. She got his voice mail and left another message.

Hanks and Druer drove to the address Castle had given them. Zayeed was in the back of the car, trussed and gagged. When they arrived at the boarded-up gas station, there was a dirty blue Honda wagon waiting there with two men sitting in it. Druer flashed his headlights on and off and the Honda answered. They pulled alongside and got out. The two men in the Honda got out,

too. One of them said, “You have our package?”

“In the back. Where do you want him?”

“If you would be so kind as to put him in our car, we’ll be on our way.”

“You have something for us?” asked Druer.

Omar handed Druer a thick envelope. “This is for Mr. Castle,” he said.

Druer and Hanks hauled Zayeed out of the back of the Suburban, carried him to the Honda, and stuffed him in the trunk.

“Lucky for you he’s a little guy,” said Hanks.

“Lucky for him,” said Omar slamming the trunk.

Their business completed, Hanks and Druer drove off into the night.

The Arabs got into their Honda and drove to their laboratory on Dean Street.

The Arabs carried Zayeed into the lab and secured him to a chair. He watched as his two captors changed into lab coats. Two other men donned serious biohazard suits. One of them took a caged monkey into a sealed room, where he injected it with a serum. A few minutes later, Mullah Omar stood before Zayeed and ripped the tape from his mouth.

“Well, my friend,” Omar said. “You find yourself caught up in something much bigger than you expected, yes? We have some time before the experiment, and I need to ask you some questions.”

Zayeed stared at Omar with hatred and fear. He said, “I thought you were a man of God, an imam, a man of peace. I heard you say prayers. Was it just an act? Now I see that you are nothing but a terrorist thug. What kind of Islam is this that lets you kidnap and kill so easily?”

“I do not wish to argue the fine points of Islamic theology with an American stooge, a Shia and an unbeliever,” said Omar. “It is enough for you to know that I am a warrior. Part of a great struggle that pits the one true God against the false gods of idol worshippers. Just tell me the truth, Zayeed, and I will see that your

death is swift and painless. Who sent you to spy on us? Who else knows about our laboratory?"

Zayeed gave a strangled laugh and said, "You say you are a warrior? What kind of warrior plots the deaths of innocent civilians? This is cowardice. This makes you a murderer, not a soldier. And when you meet this god of yours, he will tell you that before he sends you to the hell you deserve."

Omar struggled to keep his temper under control, but Zayeed's remarks had clearly angered him. "I ask you again, who sent you and who else knows about our business?"

"You won't believe me, but I'll tell you this much, the government knows all about your little lab. They've been on to you for months. They know about your connection with the LPA. They know everything. And you know how they know? One of your boys is an FBI informer."

"Lying pig!" shouted Omar and struck Zayeed several times across the face.

Zayeed spat blood in Omar's face.

"For that, I will see that your body is cut into pieces and fed to dogs."

There was a shaving of a moon above the trees when Rhoda reached the Bait & Switch. She took the hidden road behind the store and ditched her truck at the first opportunity. She grabbed her handgun and the truck's tire iron and approached the compound on foot. There were spotlights illuminating the front gate, but she hid in the tree line where she couldn't be seen. She entered the woods and circled the compound, looking for the low spot she used for entry a few days before. She found the place, but it had been filled in with concrete. There was no entry that way. She walked around to the road and looked at the gate and the guardhouse and tried to think of a way in.

She was still thinking when the black Suburban with Hanks and Druer pulled up to the gate. They were just returning from handing Zayeed over to the Arabs. The guard unlocked the gate

and opened it wide. Rhoda crouched deeper into the shadows and waited for the right moment. She didn't know what she was doing, exactly, but that open gate looked like an invitation. Even if it meant she'd be caught, at least she'd be inside; maybe intercepting her would disrupt their schedule. The car was just pulling through the gate when Rhoda sprang from the cover of the woods, put on a burst of speed, and darted past the startled guard. She was inside the compound before anyone could react.

Hanks and Druer glimpsed something streak by their car and realized it must be an intruder. They followed Rhoda and overtook her. A couple of gunshots in the air stopped her in her tracks. Hanks and Druer cuffed her and dragged her struggling to the log house. Druer knocked and Castle came out on the porch. Druer explained how they caught her rushing the gate.

“What do you want us to do with her, General?” asked Druer.

Castle came to the railing and looked down on Rhoda being held in place by Todd Hanks.

Hanks said, “Her I.D. says she's a cop with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Name's Deerwalker, Rhoda Deerwalker. She's the one who busted us in the woods that day.”

“She's the same woman from the security tape, the one who busted in here the day of the expo. What's your game, Lady?”

I'm here for my partner, and God help you if you've harmed him.”

“You've been a most persistent pain in the ass, Ms. Deerwalker. But now you've been caught trespassing on private property. I guess you didn't notice our Keep Out signs. Why, I could shoot you right now and get away with it. But I'm more interested in learning why you're harassing us.”

“Listen, Castle,” said Rhoda. “The government's on to your two-bit army. In fact, the FBI will be here any minute to close you down. I know you kidnapped my partner. Zayeed Hasan. You recognize the name? What the hell have you done with him?”

“I can assure you Miss Deerwalker that your partner, what-

ever his name is, is not here. But you most certainly are. Sergeant, blindfold the prisoner and lock her in the can. She can wait there until I decide what to do with her.” Rhoda tried kicking Druer in the balls, but Hanks grabbed her around the waist, tied a cloth around her head, and carried her into the log house. Once in the basement, she was locked into a dark cell, one arm handcuffed to a ring in the wall. With her loose hand, she removed the blindfold.

The heavy wooden door slammed shut with an awful finality. A small slit in the door provided the only light. The chain on her wrist was too short to give her enough room to sit down, so she stood or kneeled for what seemed like hours. Disillusioned and defeated, she felt miserable, angry, and stupid. Mostly, she was angry at herself for being so rash, for getting caught and caged, and for letting Zayeed and Farah down. If Zayeed was here someplace, she was not going to be of much use to him. But just in case he was in an adjoining cell, she called out his name over and over until her throat was sore. There was no answer.

Rhoda took stock of her situation. She expected the FBI to get to the compound eventually, but eventually was not going to help Zayeed or her. The thought that Zayeed might not even be here made her sick. It also occurred to her that if the FBI came charging in like the cavalry, there would be a bloodbath. More than likely, there would be a standoff and negotiations that might drag on for days. Either scenario was bad for Zayeed and bad for her. What a stupid fucking pickle she’d gotten herself into this time.

After several hours of confinement, exhaustion kicked in, and as strong and frightened as she was, she still started to doze off. The only position in which she could sleep was on her knees with her head nestled on her upraised arm. Rhoda drifted in and out of sleep and did not know how long she had been confined, but her internal clock told her it was well past midnight. It had been half past eight when she rushed the gate. Over four hours wasted. Damn, what an impulsive thing to do.

She was nodding in and out of sleep when the door to her cell opened and a figure appeared silhouetted in the doorway. Rho-

da struggled to her feet, ready to fight, but the man put his finger to his lips and made a shushing sound. He carried a large wire cutter, which he used to snip the handcuff chain with ease. In the gloom of the cell, she recognized the big man as Todd Hanks. He leaned toward her and whispered, "It's all right; I'm FBI. I'm getting you out of here. Follow me and don't make a sound. Your car around here someplace?"

Rhoda nodded yes. They moved silently up the stairs and through the log house. Rhoda was impressed at how silently the big man moved. Must have Indian blood in him, she thought. They slipped out of the kitchen door and made their way to the perimeter fence. Hanks led her to a spot near the corner. "Blind spot," he whispered and snipped an opening big enough for him to wriggle through. Rhoda held the fence open for him and he did the same for her. Moments later, they were at Rhoda's truck. She started looking behind the bumper for the hide-a-key, but Hanks dug in his pocket and handed her her keys, her wallet, and her gun. "It took me a while to get this stuff together," he said.

When they were on the road Rhoda, relaxed. "You're FBI?" she said, not quite believing her rescue.

"I've been undercover with the LPA for two years. I'll tell you all about it in a minute. Right now, I need to make a phone call. I have to call my handler and let her know I'm loose and my cover's blown. All right if I use your cell phone?"

With that Hanks reached into his pocket and came up with Rhoda's cell. He opened it and cursed, "Damn, no service."

"Listen," Rhoda said, "when you get through, tell the FBI we're on our way to 127 Dean Street in Green Bay. That's where my partner is being held; at least, I think that's where he's being held. Of course, a few hours ago, I thought he was being held at the compound."

"Was that why you went charging in there like a buffalo?" asked Hanks, clearly impressed with this woman's guts.

"Yes, that was why," admitted Rhoda. "But listen; even if he's not at Dean Street, there is a clandestine bio lab there. The lab

is run by an Islamic terrorist cell operating out of the mosque in Green Bay. They're working to weaponize bird flu. I've seen the place. Of course," she snapped her fingers, "That's where they saw Zayeed. That's why they had him snatched. I should have thought of it before. See if you can get some feds to meet us there."

"Ah, phone service at last." He punched in a series of numbers, and she heard him say, "It's me. I had to end the operation. The troops are on the way, right? No, they were going to kill this Fish and Wildlife cop I'm with. I had to get her out of there. She tells me there's a bio weapons lab at 127 Dean Street. They're playing with some nasty shit so get a biohazard team there pronto. She says they have a hostage there too so be sure to send an ambulance. We're on our way there now."

Hanks ended the connection, turned to Rhoda, and said, "Your partner probably is there. I helped deliver him into the hands of some Arab gentlemen earlier today."

"You were in on the kidnapping?" Rhoda asked.

"Me and two LPA goons. We tossed him in the trunk of their Honda, picked up our payment, and went home. Unfortunately, we left Private Shipman behind. He get picked up?"

"That's how I knew the LPA had Zayeed."

"Well, if it's any consolation, your Zayeed was fine when I last saw him at about eight o'clock."

"A lot could have happened to him in four hours," she said. "These people don't have any qualms about killing. If they get their way, millions will die."

"You had a pretty close call, yourself, tonight," Hanks told her, "I overheard Castle tell Druer to take you out to the woods at first light, shoot you, and hide your body. That's why I had to move tonight."

In the dark of the truck and the emptiness of the great north woods, Rhoda offered up a silent prayer to providence for saving her life. She prayed she might do the same for Zayeed. She reached over, squeezed Todd Hanks' hand, and said, "Thank you."

Omar called Salim to tell him they had the nosy forest warden in their custody. “He said we have been infiltrated, and the FBI knows all about us. I think he is lying, but ...”

“He lies,” said Salim. “Still, we should abandon the lab immediately. Take only what you need and destroy the rest. I will come by to get you within the hour. With God’s help, we will be in Chicago before the great Satan awakes. Have you done the final test?”

“We have.”

“Good. Let me know when you are ready to leave.”



## CHAPTER 32

Achmed, in full biohazard gear, wheeled Zayeed into the containment room at the Dean Street lab. The monkey, injected an hour earlier, was already showing signs of respiratory infection. It was coughing and sneezing in its cage, filling the air with deadly droplets. Zayeed, taped to his chair, had no choice but to breathe the poisoned air. He watched the man in the biohazard suit get decontaminated and then help his captors break down the laboratory. They removed computer hard drives were burned files. They carefully packed vials of cloudy liquid in foam-lined cases. Zayeed assumed the Arabs were planning to vacate the lab and were cleaning house.

Every fifteen minutes or so, one of the men came over to the window of the containment room to see how he was doing. After an hour, Omar came to the window and spoke to him through a loud speaker. “Zayeed,” he said, “You should be starting to feel some discomfort by now. Look at the monkey beside you. He is an hour further along than you.”

Indeed, Zayeed had been watching the monkey’s decline for the last hour. The animal was quite listless. Copious amounts of mucus ran from its nose and mouth; its breathing was labored.

“I have here a dose of antiviral medication.” Omar held a

syringe in his hand. “If you cooperate with me and tell me what you know, I will administer this drug to you. If we give it to you in the next hour, there is a good chance you will survive. What do you say?”

“What is it you want to know?” Zayed asked.

“I want to know who you work for.”

“I work for the US Fish & Wildlife Service,” said Zayed.

“We are not stupid, Zayed, the Fish Service is interested in fish. We are not fish. What were you doing here the other day?”

“I was simply driving around. It was a pure accident,” said Zayed, beginning to cough and sneeze.

“You appear to be coming down with something,” Omar said. “If you do not wish to become like our little friend there, perhaps you will tell me how you found out about our laboratory.” The monkey was lying in his cage, breathing heavily. Thick mucus bubbled from his nose.

Zayed’s nose began to run. He said, “I found a bunch of dead birds in a wildlife refuge. I sent the birds for analysis; it was a type of bird flu never seen before. One thing led to another. I found out about the Lords Patriot Army and then about this place. I was coming for a look when I ran into you. That’s all I know; I swear. Can I have the medicine now?”

“This is very interesting. Tell me, how did you find out about the LPA? And how did that lead you to us?”

“It’s pretty involved. I can’t remember all the details. One of the LPA guys talked. Yeah, that’s it; he blabbed about an Arab connection. That’s all I know; I swear. Can I have the medicine now?”

“That is an interesting story, my friend, but I do not believe a word of it. Maybe parts of it are true, but it doesn’t matter. Soon, millions will be as sick as you, and they will learn the same hard truth that you will now learn—there is no cure. This,” Omar held up the syringe, “this is salt water, it will not save you. Nothing can save you. You are the first of many to die. By tomorrow this time, ten thousand infected American travelers will fly out of Chicago to

infect the world. Goodbye, Zayeed. May Allah grant you peace.”

Zayeed struggled in his chair, his strangled cries ending in a coughing fit that left him weak and panting. He cried for the loss of a life with Farah, for the child he would never know, and for the cruelty and injustice a merciful God allows to exist. When he was through crying, he looked over at the monkey. The monkey was dead.

When the influenza virus enters the human body through inhalation, it is uniquely equipped to colonize it. Receptors on the outside of the viral capsule detect the chemicals that form the membranes of the cells lining the respiratory system. These chemicals cause the virus to secrete a protein that opens the cell membrane, allowing the virus to enter. Once inside the cell, the viral RNA infiltrates the cell’s nucleus and replaces the cell’s reproductive machinery with its own. Soon, the hijacked cell fills to bursting with flu virus. Then, the membrane ruptures and floods the bloodstream with millions of virii, and the cycle begins again.

The millions of virii and dead and dying cells fill the body with toxins. The body mounts a ferocious immune response, but in the case of influenza, there is often little it can do. The virus attacks the bronchial tubes and the mucus membranes lining the airways to the lungs. Before long, the lungs themselves are involved. The delicate alveoli break down and fill with fluid, and the organism, now struggling for life, fights back with high fever, inflammation, and all the weapons at its disposal.

Zayeed sat in his chair getting sicker and weaker. He could still see Omar and the three scientists scurrying about, trying to leave as little evidence as possible. He had resigned himself to die and had made his peace with death. After a couple of hours, he was so feverish it was all he could do to stay awake. His body ached all over, and it was hard to get a good breath. He had never felt so bad so quickly. A fifth man entered the lab, and then all five of them left without so much as a glance at Zayeed. He muttered the only

prayer he could remember.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in a helicopter under a plastic tent. It took all his strength to catch the attention of the space-suited medical attendant. The man leaned down to hear what Zayeed had to say. Zayeed summoned what little breath and strength he had left and managed to say “Chicago.” Then, he closed his eyes and let his soul leave this troubled world.

The FBI doesn’t have much of a presence in Wisconsin. There’s a field office in Milwaukee with a half-dozen people, only four of them agents. When the Milwaukee office fielded the call from the state police that Zayeed Hasan, a federal agent, had been kidnapped, the Milwaukee feds dispatched special agents Nicholas Palmer and Linda Holt to investigate. They arrived in Boulder Lake a good three hours after Rhoda left on her suicide mission. After they interrogated Private Shipman and took testimony from Farah and Sheriff Boyd, it was pretty clear to them that their next move was to search the LPA compound. The FBI doesn’t have a very good record confronting armed cults and fringe groups. They faced stinging criticism after the debacles at Ruby Ridge and Waco. After those fiascos, the bureau put procedures in place for dealing with armed groups. Agents Palmer and Holt were told to locate the compound but wait for an FBI Rapid Response Team. These specialized teams consist of snipers, negotiators, and a SWAT team. The nearest such team was in Minneapolis, and it took another six hours to helicopter them to Misty Lake.

While the FBI was dealing with a potential confrontation with the LPA, Todd Hanks and Terry Winter were stirring up the bureau’s counterterrorism division with frantic calls about the clandestine bio lab in Green Bay. On a scale of calamities, a terrorism threat elicits a far stronger and more rapid response than does a kidnapping. So, even though the bureau first learned of the lab’s existence several hours after the Hasan kidnapping, there was already a small army of bio weapons specialists on the scene when Rhoda and Hanks arrived at the Dean Street lab.

There was an Army bio-materials handling team, the Wisconsin State Police Anti-Terrorism Task Force, and the Department of Homeland Security's Bio-Weapons Team, in addition to the FBI's own bio/anti-terror squad. They were all mobilized within minutes of hearing about the threat and had descended on 127 Dean Street en masse. When Rhoda and Todd Hanks arrived, Dean Street looked like a set for a science fiction movie. It was already crawling with police and National Guard troops, and at least a dozen men in serious bio protective gear were coming and going.

The whole area was cordoned off for several blocks around, but Hank's FBI connections got them past the barricades. Two men in protective suits were wheeling a gurney out of the building when Rhoda arrived. The gurney had a special containment tent around it, but Rhoda recognized Zayeed in spite of how terrible he looked.

"Is he dead?" she asked the nearest man.

"Just about," he answered.

The medics put Zayeed in a helicopter and it took off immediately.

"Do you know where they're taking him?" she asked the medic.

"Minneapolis General Hospital is set up for quarantine and isolation cases. That's where he's going."

Inside the old warehouse turned bio weapons lab, several forensic teams pored over what remained. The dead monkey was sealed and whisked off for testing. All evidence was carefully sealed and labeled. This was a crime scene of national importance.

Rhoda sought out the head of the task force, an FBI veteran named Lyons. She told him what she saw that day she checked out the Dumpster, and what little she knew about the men who worked in the lab. She told him about the mosque and how surprised she was to see Mullah Omar having a part in this. Lyons dispatched a team to search the mosque. Rhoda remembered to tell him about the dead birds and the analysis from the CDC. She gave Lyons Dr. Barnes's name and phone number. Rhoda asked Lyons if he could send a helicopter for Farah and deliver her to the hospital so she

could be with Zayeed. He said, “I’ll do my best, but right now, the top priority is locating the people who made this germ before they can spread it around. In the meantime, you’re the only one who knows what these guys look like. Can you sit with a police artist and give him a description?” For the next half hour or so, that was what she did.

Shortly after Rhoda sat with the police artist, Lyons received word that Zayeed had died en route to the hospital after uttering that single word—Chicago. In seconds, Lyons was on the phone to his superiors in Washington. Moments later, a response was mounted. Rhoda’s descriptions and a pretty good likeness of Mullah Omar were faxed to the relevant agencies in and around Chicago. Traffic was stopped at roadblocks on major roads connecting northern Wisconsin to Chicago, Illinois. Biohazard teams were put on alert, the governor of Illinois was informed about the threat, and the country’s anti-terror machinery was put into operation.

Lyons now sought out Rhoda amidst the general confusion. He found her on the phone with Farah. Rhoda told Farah she’d call her right back and gave her attention to Lyons. He told her, “Zayeed didn’t make it. I’m terribly sorry. He must have been a good man and a strong one. He hung on long enough to give us a lead on where the terrorists may be headed, and we’re putting everything we have into it. No one ever expected the Fish and Wildlife Service would be on the front lines in the war on terror.”

When Lyons walked away, Rhoda pushed redial on her phone and called Farah again. “Oh Farah,” was all Rhoda managed to say before emotions choked her. It was enough to send Farah into a keening wail of despair. It was the saddest sound Rhoda had ever heard.

Rhoda was filled with guilt and self-loathing. “It’s all my fault. Blame me, Farah. I got him into this. I’m so sorry.” Hot tears streamed down Rhoda’s cheeks. Hanks handed her a Kleenex. “Zayeed loved you, Rhoda. And he loved his job. Don’t blame

yourself.” Being forgiven only served to make Rhoda feel worse. The call ended with both women crying and mourning their loss in the confused way we humans do.

In the great Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918, more than twelve million human beings died. It was estimated that the unknown germ killed thirty percent of its victims directly. The rest were so weakened by the disease that they succumbed to various secondary infections, primarily pneumonia. In 1918, doctors didn’t know what they were up against. The virus was not known to science until 1933. Add to that the lack of antibiotics and the chaos and dislocations of a world war, and the enormous death toll was almost understandable.

Modern medicine and advances in understanding the pathology of the disease have kept humanity safe from another great flu pandemic. Vaccines and anti viral medicines have kept the disease in check for almost a century. But influenza is an ancient enemy and a patient one, adapting to man’s efforts, mutating, changing, and surviving. With a little tweaking from some misguided biologists, it can become even more deadly than it naturally is.

## CHAPTER 33

At dawn, the FBI and state police SWAT teams were poised and ready. A judge had issued a search warrant for the LPA compound several hours earlier. The FBI's new protocols insisted that the warrant be served with "careful restraint," which agents Holt and Palmer took to mean a half-dozen officers in riot gear approaching the front gate.

It was the hapless Private Beaty on guard duty who sounded the alarm. When he saw the police and FBI drive up, he hit a switch that triggered a jury-rigged car alarm. The noise blared through speakers placed around the compound, and a dazed and sleepy militia tumbled from their beds and rushed fully armed, though only half awake, to their stations. A few shots were fired, and the siege of the LPA compound began.

"That didn't go very well," said Holt to Palmer as they took cover behind their vehicle.

"So much for careful restraint," said Palmer to Holt. "Time to bring in the negotiator."

The negotiator attached to the FBI Rapid Response Team was a twenty-year veteran named Joe Miller. He had negotiated with bank robbers, street gangs, serial killers, and other assorted bad guys in a wide variety of hostage situations. This was his first experience with a survivalist militia, but he had done his home-



work and knew something about Desmond Castle and the LPA.

He raised the bullhorn to his lips. “General Castle, this is Joseph Miller. I’m the FBI negotiator. Can you hear me?” The answer came in the form of a bullet over his head. “I’ll take that as a yes. I’m going to give you a phone number. You can call me on that number if you want to talk about how to remedy this situation.” He called out the number and a few minutes later, Miller’s cell phone rang. “This is Joe Miller; is this Desmond Castle?”

“This is Castle. What do you people want?”

“We have a warrant to search your compound and question you about the kidnapping of a federal agent.”

“You have no right to invade my property.”

“Mr. Castle, we have a search warrant signed by a judge. According to the laws of the United States of America, that gives us the right.”

“The Lord’s Patriot Army does not recognize the government of the United States. We seceded from the country and its government six years ago and declared ourselves a free and independent people. So, you can take your search warrant and shove it.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, Mr. Castle, but that is not how the law enforcement branches of the country see the situation. We have a job to do, and your creating a standoff like this only makes that job more difficult, more dangerous, and more serious for everyone concerned. We don’t want to use force, but we have to investigate a crime.”

“I’m not the one creating the standoff,” Castle replied. “We were just minding our own business until you came along. There’s no federal agent here. We’re not looking to hurt anyone, either, but we fully intend to defend ourselves and our property. We’ve been preparing for this day for a long time. I hope you boys are prepared for a long wait.” With that exchange, Castle hung up and the fifty or so lawmen settled in for the inevitable shootout.

The police set up a command and control tent in the middle of the road. It was the only clear spot in the heavy woods surround-

ing the compound. After a couple of hours of waiting, Joe Miller and the two FBI agents, Holt and Palmer, conferred about how best to proceed. Palmer said, “I estimate less than ten bad guys in several scattered locations.”

“No one has shown themselves yet.” added Holt. “What does Washington say about deadly force?”

“We’re not to initiate hostilities,” said Miller. “We can only fire to protect ourselves. Washington doesn’t want another public relations disaster.”

Palmer said, “They could have a year’s worth of supplies in there. Are we supposed to sit here for a year? Is that good PR?”

“I’ve been going over this file.” Joe Miller slapped his palm on a brown folder in front of him. “And from what I can tell, this guy Castle is a one-man show. He dreamed up the LPA, recruited its members, and preaches its philosophy of hate. He’s your classic charismatic leader. Eliminate him and the whole thing falls apart. I’m going to try getting him angry. Maybe he’ll expose himself and we can get a shot at him. Or maybe he’ll make a mistake. One way or the other, it ought to change the status quo.” Joe Miller picked up the phone and dialed Castle’s number. This time Castle answered.

“That you, Miller? What do you want?”

“I’ve been reading about your organization. I find it fascinating.”

“Oh yeah?” said Castle. “You wanna join?”

“No, thanks. I don’t think you’d want me anyway,” said Miller. “I’m Jewish.”

“Isn’t that just like the stupid fucking government to send a goddamn Jew to do their talking for them? You Jews have your grubby fingers in everything—Hollywood, the media, finance, foreign policy, even the FBI.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Castle; we run the world.”

“Don’t you patronize me Jew-boy. I know my history. I read all about the corrupting influence of your people on this country. Hitler had the right idea; burn the lot of you.”

Miller said calmly into the phone, “Tell me, Mr. Castle, did you ever actually meet a Jew? Have you ever sat down with one and had a discussion? Have you ever tried to learn anything about them besides what you read in your anti-Semitic hate mail?”

“I don’t need to have a discussion with a disease to know that I have to get rid of it. You and your kind are responsible for all of the world’s troubles.”

“I think you give us too much credit, Mr. Castle. There are only ten million Jews in a world population of six billion. Doesn’t that seem like scapegoating to you, like picking on the little guy? It sure does to me. Do you really think that a fraction of one percent of the planet’s population is really running things? If Jews are running the world, why are they so persecuted? Why are the vast majority of Jews living ordinary middle class lives instead of living like kings?”

There was a long silence on the phone; finally Castle spoke through clenched teeth. “It’s just like a Jew to twist an argument into knots and confuse the issue. I hate you and your kind, and that’s enough for me.”

“Right. My mind is made up; don’t confuse me with facts. I hate you because I hate you. There’s a word for that kind of reasoning — tautology. I call it stubborn stupidity.”

“Listen, Jew-boy. You think you’re so smart, why don’t you come up here and arrest me? You Jews talk a good game, but everyone knows you have no guts. Can your degenerate race stand up to a strong Christian? I think you’re all just talk. You like to use others to do your dirty work.”

“Wait a minute, Castle. Am I to understand you want me to come in there and arrest you? Only a fool would walk through that gate, and I try my best not to be a fool.”

“I’ll tell my men to hold their fire. Let’s see if the Jews have any balls. You make it up here to the log house without shitting your pants and I’ll help you put the cuffs on myself. Besides, I never got to see a real Jew up close before. I hear you all have horns.”

Joe Miller whispered instructions to the rapid response team leader. The team leader, in turn, instructed the snipers to get a good line of sight on the front porch of the log house. Miller grabbed a pair of wire cutters from a startled state trooper, walked up to the front gate, snipped the chain, and walked slowly up the parade ground walk. As he passed the guardhouse and the giant inverted American flag, he placed his hands on his head and turned around to show he was unarmed.

He was most of the way to the log house when the screen door flew open and Desmond Castle burst out, an automatic rifle in his hands. "Well, you surprised me, Miller. You do credit to your race. I was wrong about you not having any balls, but you were wrong about me surrendering. Here's a bullet for you from Jesus." Castle raised his AK-47 to his shoulder. Two sniper's bullets dropped him where he stood.

Joe Miller expected to hear the sounds of the remaining LPA members laying down their arms. Instead, he heard the hateful ranting of a committed diehard yelling into a bullhorn from the basement of the log house.

The voice belonged to Sergeant Druer, the only militiaman to remain defiant. He screamed, "I'll shoot the first LPA man who deserts his post," and just to emphasize his point, he took a shot at Joe Miller. Joe dove for cover behind a bush. The marksmen opened up again and kept Druer pinned down while Miller ran zigging and zagging onto the porch and safely out of Druer's line of fire. Joe Miller lifted Castle's weapon from his dead hands and walked cautiously into the house. He could hear Druer firing from below. Miller tiptoed across the living-room floor and found the door to the basement. He descended the stairs as quietly as he could. The bottom of the stairs was sealed by a wooden door. Miller kicked it in. Sergeant Druer turned and fired. Miller put four rounds into him, and Druer fell in a heap.

The remaining LPA troops surrendered as soon as Druer went down. The rest of the day was given over to evidence gathering and mission report paperwork. Joe Miller was recalled to

Washington for a chewing out. Negotiators were not supposed to be heroes. They were supposed to negotiate. Joe felt differently about the matter.

## CHAPTER 34

Omar, Salim, and the three scientists drove through the night and entered the suburbs of Chicago at dawn. The sun, an orange ball, rose bright and searing in a cloudless sky; it promised another scorching day after two record breakers in a row. The Arabs had stayed off the interstates and larger highways to avoid roadblocks, and now they wove their way through the smaller streets of the city. They were heading toward O'Hare Airport, where they planned to find a hotel room in order to prepare themselves for their big day. Salim spent most of the trip on his computer, checking airline schedules and purchasing last-minute tickets for the five of them.

Chicago's O'Hare is the world's third busiest airport. More than four thousand flights a day connect through it to every major city in the world. Salim purchased tickets to five cities, all of them in the United States. The five conspirators were traveling in Salim's old Mercedes. The car's trunk held their overnight bags and a foam-lined attaché case containing a single vial of modified avian flu virus. Enough virus, praise God, to start the next great pandemic, Salim thought. This was the fruit of his dream, the result of years of planning, years of training, and millions of dollars in expense. The genius of Western science opened the door to its own destruction. Salim found a certain wholeness, a certain symmetry

in that. Their simple, unstoppable plan was to inject themselves with the disease, board airplanes at O’Hare, and fly to distant cities to spread the infection nationwide.

First, though, they had to rest somewhere and make ready. They must stop, eat, pray, and inject the virus exactly on schedule. They intended to board the planes when they were most infectious. As they neared the airport, Salim saw that they had their choice of a dozen hotels. Choosing at random, he picked a Hampton Inn and Suites. “This will do, Jamil. Pull in here, but don’t pull too close. It’s better if we are not seen together as a group.”

Salim got out of the car and walked to the registration desk in the hotel lobby. In the short walk from air conditioned car to air conditioned lobby, his shirt was wet with sweat. The heat reminded him of Gaza. He checked them into a two-bedroom suite on the hotel’s sixth floor by signing the register with a made up name—Gordon Smith. The clerk handed him the key and said in Egyptian-accented Arabic, “This heat makes me homesick. How about you?”

Salim was momentarily stunned and almost replied in the same language. Instead, he looked at the desk clerk for the first time. He saw a young Egyptian, about twenty-five, smiling with recognition. Is it so obvious, thought Salim. Looking Arab in a post-nine-eleven America was not so good. In English, Salim replied, “I’m sorry, but I don’t speak Arabic.”

After check-in, the men drifted up to their room in ones and twos, arriving by different routes. No one paid them any attention; at that hour, there weren’t many people in the corridors. Once in the room, the five men freshened up and lay down to nap for a couple of hours. The ample accommodations provided enough beds and couches for everyone.

The peace and quiet of the hotel room was in stark contrast to the chaos in the government anti-terrorist command bunker. A dozen state, city, and national agencies were trying to coordinate a defense against what was understood to be an imminent terrorist attack. Chicago is a huge city, and trying to find a few men hiding

in it is a daunting task. Trying to do so in a few hours was asking the impossible. No one was sure of anything. No one really knew if Zayeed's dying words even meant that Chicago was the target of the attack. Maybe Chicago was misinformation designed to make them squander their resources while the terrorists went elsewhere, or maybe "Chicago" was just the aimless babbling of a dying man. Rhoda had provided descriptions of four men, but who knew how big the cell really was? Analysis from various labs was trickling in. It looked like the terrorists were working on a bird flu mutation, manipulating the virus to make it deadly to humans. It was assumed that they had succeeded and that they were about to set their creation loose on an unsuspecting world. Rhoda's descriptions and the artist's sketch of Omar were widely circulated, every tip and lead was actively pursued, and a small army of worried experts tried their best to hunt the terrorists down. In reality, there was not all that much anyone could do.

Every available police officer, national guardsman, and federal agent joined in the hunt. The airports and train and bus stations were searched and manned. Security delays at the airport inconvenienced thousands. Armed men and women patrolled the malls and office buildings downtown, alerting security people, doormen, shopkeepers, and taxi drivers to keep a lookout for suspicious Middle Eastern men. It smacked of racial profiling, but there it was: the terrorists were Arab men bent on self-destruction. It was no time for political sensitivity.

Since this was a germ warfare alert, the city's medical facilities were put into a high state of readiness. Bio-hazard and decontamination teams were suited up and waiting. Hundreds of police and federal agents fanned out to canvass the city's hotels, and Omar's picture was shown to every desk clerk and housekeeper the police could find. Precious hours went by with no sightings and no leads. The young Egyptian desk clerk at the Hampton Inn looked at Omar's composite sketch and shook his head.

"I have never seen this man," he said.

"Have any Arab-looking men checked in in the last few



hours?” an overworked city policeman asked.

The clerk paused. He thought about the man he assumed was from his part of the world but who claimed not to speak Arabic. Perhaps he was mistaken. Many Mediterranean people looked like Arabs. At last, he just shook his head and said, “No sir, no one.”

At 9:45 in the morning, Salim woke the team. One by one, they entered the showers, lathered their bodies, and shaved off their body hair. This was so that they would enter paradise clean and pure. Then, they donned the white burial garments of martyrs and prayed a final prayer. Achmed and Jamil prepared letters to family and loved ones back home. Khalid made a martyr’s video. They left these confessions in the room for the police to find.

Soon, it was time to change into their disguises. They wished to look respectable. They would be flying business class. Their disguise would be that of harried businessmen coming down with colds, coughing and sneezing but still dedicated enough to keep working. Beside their business attire, they altered their physical appearance as best they could. They shaved off their beards, donned eyeglasses, and glued on fake mustaches. From a professional makeup kit, Salim applied bits of plastic and paint that changed the shape of a nose and the contours of a face. They checked each other out and smiled strained smiles. Then, Salim gathered them together for a final prayer.

He said, “An all knowing and merciful God has brought us to this day. We are doing his will. We will strike a blow against our enemy from which he will never recover. We will all be martyrs, and our names will be recorded among the great warriors of the Faith. Soon we will meet again in paradise, where seventy virgins will attend us. May Allah bless us all.” Then he told them it was time. They rolled up their sleeves and lined up for their injections.

In another part of the city, another crisis was brewing. The record-breaking hot weather was taxing the power grid beyond

its capacity. It was only 9:30 in the morning and already power consumption was pegging the needles at maximum. Grid managers at Illinois Power and Light were scrambling to meet the unprecedented demand. Shift supervisor Harvey Levine had been putting in some horrendous hours working in the company's control center, a concrete bunker in the bowels of the city. It was from here that the power grid that fed the city was managed and controlled.

Levine had spent the last forty-eight hours in this underground tomb, completely unaware of the terrorist frenzy going on above his head. He had his own problems. He was facing another day of maximum demand and had to battle for every kilowatt. Irritable and sleep deprived, Levine snapped at his secretary, "Janet, get the mayor on the phone — please." When Janet had someone from the mayor's office on the line, Levine told him, "The situation's getting worse. The system is stretched like a piano wire. One little glitch, and we're going to have brownouts or worse. One transformer pops, and people are going to die in the dark."

Rhoda drove Farah to Detroit, where Zayeed's family lived and where his funeral was to be held. Farah's family was from nearby Dearborn. They would also be there. Zayeed's body was also in transit and was being delivered to a funeral home in Detroit for interment. It was a sad trip. Rhoda was wracked with guilt. Several times she tried to beg forgiveness but every time she opened her mouth her eyes filled with tears and the words wouldn't come. She wanted to say that it was all her fault that she was rash and reckless, stupid and careless and that it was her shortcomings that got Zayeed killed. That was what she wanted to say but all that came out was "I'm so sorry" over and over again.

Farah thought that Rhoda was grieving for Zayeed not that she was confessing to complicity in his murder. She did her best to comfort Rhoda saying things like "He was a wonderful man" and "he loved you very much, Rhoda." This had the effect of only making Rhoda feel even worse if that was possible.

The funeral was a small family affair, which in Arab-Amer-

ican circles meant about one hundred people. Zayeed's sisters, their husbands, his parents and Farah's parents, some aunts, uncles, friends, and classmates all came to the grave site and shed tears. Rhoda was both surprised and gladdened to see Terry Winter there. He told her, "the service had not lost an agent in the line of duty since 1946".

Muslim funerals are simple, dignified affairs. The body was committed to the ground, prayers were said, and the mourners returned to Zayeed's parent's home for refreshments and reflection. Rhoda was impressed by how alike people were when it came to the basic things like births, weddings and funerals--so simple, so human, so alike. It could have been a Christian or Jewish funeral and, with slight variation, a Chippewa rite. What Rhoda couldn't understand was the celebration of death that the terrorists wanted. That wasn't religion, that was perversion.

Rhoda approached Terry Winter after the service. "It makes me proud that you came, Terry," she said. Thank you."

"He was my agent, too. I hired him. It's a loss for us all."

"Sometime in the few weeks, I need to speak to you about my future," Rhoda said. "I'm not sure I can do this any more."

"Please, Rhoda, don't make any decisions about your future now. Take some time off. Give yourself time to grieve. I'll send someone down to Green Bay to cover for you. Take a leave of absence. We'll talk about your future in a couple of weeks," Terry replied.

She thanked him for his kindness. She knew that what she felt was not something a couple of weeks of R & R could heal, but when she got back to Green Bay, she packed her things and headed off to Odanah, the small town on the Bad River Reservation where she was born, to think things over.

Achmed, Omar, Jamil and Khalid lined up for their flu shots. Salim injected a large dose of virus into their arms, and then Omar did the same for him. Salim checked his watch. It was 11:30; everything was on schedule. He told the others that they had forty

minutes to wait before they had to board the hotel's shuttle bus and head for the airport. "This will give the virus a chance to take hold and the first symptoms an opportunity to appear. Even if we do not succeed in getting on a plane, the second we emerge from this building, we will be spreading our infection. By the time we board the plane, the plague will have been unleashed." The men settled in. Some watched television, Omar read the Q'ran, and Salim napped. Time passed slowly. Outside in the late summer afternoon, an increasingly frantic search went on.

Khalid felt it first. A tickle in his throat that made him cough. A few minutes later, Omar sneezed. Then, in rapid succession, all five men were exhibiting signs of a bad cold. Salim checked his watch again. It was time to go. They were traveling light. A carry-on bag for show, no luggage. Salim made sure they had their tickets, passports, and photo I.D. Then, he checked everyone again. They left the suite together and rang for the elevator. The elevator arrived empty. They got in as a group and pushed the lobby button. The doors closed and the elevator descended.

Several blocks away, in the power company's grid management control room, an alarm went off. Technicians checked the board and watched in horror as three-fifths of the city went dark. Harvey Levine shouted orders, phones rang, and technicians threw switches. The grid was going down. Now Levine's job was damage control. He had to isolate the damage and save what he could. Emergency power crews that had been on standby for the last few days were dispatched to the blacked-out areas. As soon as Levine knew where to send them, they were ready to go. One by one, the substations called in. Transmission lines and transformers were checked. The emergency management system worked efficiently. Harvey felt confident he could bring the city back on line before nightfall.

At the Hampton Inn, the elevator doors closed and the car began its descent. After only a few seconds, the light went out and the elevator car jerked to a halt. It was stuck between the third

and fourth floors. The five men looked at one another in disbelief. Achmed pushed the alarm bell. The men could hear a distant ringing. There was an emergency telephone below the bank of buttons. Salim opened the little door and picked up the handset. The line was dead. "There has been a power failure," he said. "Hopefully, it will not last more than a few minutes."

Jamil's huge sneeze was followed by a series of six sneezes by Achmed. The five men sat on the floor of the elevator and waited for either rescue or the return of power. It was getting hot in the small space, and even though the five men were sweating, they were shivering with fever.

Out on the streets of Chicago, the search for the terrorists was not made any easier by the black out. Some of the local police had to be diverted from the search for the terrorists. Cops were needed to unsnarl traffic, guard banks and museums, and keep the city running. In the city's crisis management center, all was chaos. The federal agencies, however, kept their focus on the bio threat. The blackout gave them some pause. They wondered whether it was deliberate, but they soon eliminated that possibility from their calculations. They assumed that it was inconveniencing the terrorists as much as it was hampering the average citizen. It would be some hours before they knew how just how inconvenienced the terrorists really were.

By the third hour of the blackout, the citizens of Chicago were in an angry mood. Without air conditioning, the high-rise towers quickly became uninhabitable. People streamed into the streets and headed for the parts of the city that still had power. The streets were soon jammed, every taxi occupied. Without working traffic lights, the congestion reached nightmare proportions. It was a day Chicagoans would long remember. Fortunately for the city, it was daytime. The power company's repair crews had an easier time spotting and solving problems: an overheated feeder line here, a shut-down distribution substation there, a few fried transform-

ers north of the city, and a few downed lines in the south. Piece by piece, the power grid was being restored. “Repairs were estimated to take no more than another hour or two.” Harvey Levine told the mayor the good news. The mayor was unimpressed. At least, Harvey didn’t have to worry about preventing looting, evacuating the elderly, and unsnarling the horrendous traffic jams. The mayor was dealing with those problems, but for Harvey Levine, the power crisis was nightmare enough.

The scene in the elevator was straight out of Dante’s depiction of hell. Five men lay on the elevator floor, bodies wracked with fever, too weak even to cough. The disease they perfected worked only too well. Salim checked his watch for the thousandth time. “Too late. Too late.” It was almost four o’clock. They should be landing already. He should have spread contagion to thousands of travelers at New York’s JFK by now. The others should have been sending the unsuspecting populations of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, and Miami to their deaths. Was this God’s judgment on them? Why would a merciful God allow them to come so far, only to snatch victory away at the last second? How close they had come. How difficult to know God’s will. Was God amused at their predicament? Salim wondered if God had a sense of humor. It was almost funny. All the work, all the planning, to be undone by a popped circuit breaker somewhere. He would have laughed out loud if he had the strength.

At five minutes to six, the lights of the city came back on. Harvey Levine and his weary crew cheered and popped champagne corks. The blackout had lasted six and one-half hours, no big deal as these things went. Thanks to a fast response and good teamwork, disruption of the life of the city was kept to a minimum. Seventeen people, mostly elderly, needed hospitalization for heat-related injuries, but the only deaths reported were five guys trapped in an elevator somewhere near the airport. The city was back on line and best of all, the weatherman predicted cooler weather in the

coming days. A very weary management team called it a day and headed for home.

As soon as the power returned to the Hampton Inn, the elevators resumed their interrupted trips. Three tourists from Kansas were waiting for the elevator in the lobby. The door opened on the hellish scene of five dead men sprawled on the floor. The three tourists screamed in unison. The desk clerk and hotel staff came running. The elevator was taken out of service and emergency services called.

Because of the terror alert, the nine-one-one operator called the FBI. Rhoda's sketch helped the Chicago police identify the dead men as the terrorist cell. The dead were removed to special morgues and their rooms sealed and searched. The tapes and letters were found and identification was confirmed. Specially trained biohazard teams converged on the Hampton Inn and quickly quarantined the entire hotel. In minutes, biohazard-suited men from the CDC and a dozen different state and federal agencies were crawling all over the place.

The entire hotel population was sequestered and a large area surrounding the hotel was quarantined. Antiviral medication was administered to everyone within a ten-block radius. The medication would have been useless in an epidemic, but since there was no direct exposure with living and breathing terrorists, the medication had the effect of reassuring the public that something was being done. All in all, it was a near thing, and, regardless of one's religious commitment, there was general agreement among the hard-nosed professionals that this was as close to a miracle as anyone was likely to see.

## CHAPTER 35

A day after what the papers were calling “the plague scare of the century,” Rhoda packed a bag and drove north to the Bad River Reservation. Her grandmother, Dancing Bear, was surprised to see her again so soon. Rhoda moved back into her old room and spent a couple of days walking through the woods of her childhood, reflecting on what she had done with her life and what life still had to offer. On the third day home, she drove into Ashland to make a phone call. There were almost no telephones on the reservation and absolutely no cell phone service. She could have called from the casino, but her brothers worked there and she didn’t feel like explaining herself to them.

Instead, she drove to a filling station on the state highway and used a pay phone to call Bill O’Halleran. They kept in touch for a while after their brief but intense affair with Bill was cut short by her promotion resulting from the bird-smuggling case they worked on together. However, for reasons that were still unclear, even to Rhoda, she never invited him up to Green Bay for a visit. Eventually, Bill got tired of calling. She hadn’t heard from him in a few months but, now that she had made a mess of things, she missed his strong, quiet presence. Bill was also a cop, someone she could talk to about her judgment, or lack thereof. And her guilt. She knew that Bill would tell her the truth, even if it was painful to hear.



She called Bill's cell phone number, and he picked up on the second ring. Real friends are always happy to hear from you when you call, and Bill was happy to hear from Rhoda. She could hear it in his voice.

"I've been reading all about the big terror plot up your way," Bill said. "Did you have any part in that?"

"There's so much to tell you, Bill, that I hardly know where to begin. One of the reasons I'm calling is to tell you the story of the last few weeks and ask your advice about something. It's probably wishful thinking, but do you think I could see you, maybe spend a couple of days with you?"

"Sure, Rhoda, what did you have in mind exactly?" Bill's heart was beating so wildly that he was sure Rhoda would ask him what that sound was. He hadn't realized until that moment how much he missed her and how much he cared.

"I'm not sure, exactly. We could meet somewhere, maybe down your way or up here."

"Where's 'up here?'" Bill asked.

"I'm up in Ashland. I'm staying in my parent's house on the reservation, but I can get you a discounted room at the casino."

Bill thought for a moment and said, "I'll tell you what, Rhoda. I have some vacation time coming to me. I wouldn't mind a few days in the woods, maybe a little gambling. How's the fishing up there?"

"Best in the world," said Rhoda, "and thanks Bill."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

By the time Rhoda hung up the phone, she was already feeling better than she had in days. There was something so solid and reassuring about Bill that made even this personal crisis bearable.

Relieved and almost happy, Rhoda drove to the casino and had the desk page her brother Mike. Mike was a security guard with the casino, and Rhoda was hoping she could book a discounted room at the lodge through Mike's employee discount. She could have paged her older brother, Charlie, who was a blackjack dealer at the

casino, but she knew Charlie worked nights. Mike appeared at the desk after a few minutes. He was a slim, good-looking young man two years younger than Rhoda. He had dark black hair, dark eyes, and strong Chippewa features. He was wearing his security guard's uniform, a white shirt and black slacks. He beamed a healthy white-toothed smile when he saw his sister waiting for him. They hugged and sat on one of the many lobby sofas.

Rhoda asked Mike if he could arrange a room for a friend of hers. She knew that by asking this favor, she would have to endure some good-natured teasing from her kid brother, but she didn't mind.

"Tell me about this friend of yours. This is a girlfriend, right?"

Rhoda shook her head no.

"Oh, big sister has a boyfriend. I see. Well, you better introduce him to Charlie and me and see if we approve. Don't worry about the room, Sis. I'll arrange everything. You'll want two beds, right?"

Rhoda punched him in the shoulder. Mike said, "OK, I couldn't resist poking a little fun. Just leave it to me. It'll be good to have you around for a few days. When do you need the room?"

"How about I let you know in a couple of hours?"

"Sure. Just leave his name and dates with the front desk. I'll pick them up later."

She thanked Mike and found a pay phone. Bill told her he could come up the day after tomorrow and could stay for three days.

"I'll make the arrangements. I'm at the casino now. There are no phones on the reservation, so I'll meet you here Wednesday evening. Thanks again for doing this, Bill."

"Thanks for asking me."

Rhoda was waiting in the hotel lobby when Bill arrived. She watched him unfold his six-foot frame from his little Honda and stretch his back after the long drive and thought how good he

looked. He may be ten years older than me, she thought, but he doesn't look it.

Bill appeared a little tired after the eight-hour drive, but he brightened considerably when he saw Rhoda. They embraced, looked into each other's eyes, and shared a more-than-friendly kiss. Rhoda helped him with his bags and walked him to the check-in desk. They signed him in, got the key, and went up to his room. The room was beautifully appointed. The deep-pile carpet and luxurious furnishings were in sharp contrast to the log walls and faux rustic look of the building's exterior.

Bill sat down on the bed with an exhausted sigh. Rhoda came over to him and caressed his face. He looked up at her as she leaned down and planted a tender kiss on his mouth. The kiss rekindled the smoldering passion of nine months earlier. The kisses that followed led inexorably to the same conclusion that two people, strongly attracted to each other, always seem to reach. It was what Rhoda needed after the grief and tension of the last few weeks. She was surprised at her own hunger and how much she had missed this gentle man. It wasn't long before they were lying on the bed, spent and smiling. They looked at each other and laughed when they realized that they hadn't said a word to each other since "Hello" in the lobby.

"I thought I'd have to live with my memories of you," Bill said. "I'm so pleased to have the chance to add to them. I'd re-played the old ones so often I was afraid I'd wear them out."

"Why, that's about the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me," said Rhoda without even a hint of irony. "No kidding, Bill. That was beautifully said."

They showered and dressed for dinner at the lodge. There was a lot of catching up to do. Rhoda let Bill speak first, and he told her the news from Oconee. "I must have told you about Harvey and Cantress and how they were struggling with the twins. They're so identical that Harvey can't tell them apart. He has to put a Band Aid on one of the girls so he knows which one is which. They're cute as the dickens, though. They named them Clara

and Carol.” It seemed as if he there were a hundred stories to tell Rhoda about people she knew.

The meal came, and all conversation stopped. They were both having the fresh perch with wild rice, and there was a bottle of white wine sitting in ice at Bill’s elbow. After some more small talk, Rhoda began to tell Bill the story of her adventure with the LPA and the terrorist cell she uncovered. It was too much to tell over a single meal, and it wasn’t what she wanted to be talking to Bill about, anyway. She interrupted her narrative as they had a fabulous chocolate mousse for dessert. When they had finished, they walked out on the porch. There was a cool breeze off the lake, and the clear sky was festooned with stars. It was the first week in August, and there was a definite chill in the air. They sat on rockers, and Rhoda went on with her story. Bill didn’t say much, but she knew he was listening intently. Rhoda got up to the part of Zayeed’s death and began to cry. Bill put his arm around her and pressed her close. Rhoda let the tears come. She had been strong and brave since the funeral, but now, on this night, in the arms of this good man, she let the sadness out. People turned to see what was going on, so Bill took Rhoda’s hand and said, “How about we take a walk around the grounds and you tell me all about it.”

As they walked around the casino’s gardens, Rhoda got hold of her emotions and told Bill about the funeral. Rhoda said, “We were such good friends, the three of us. Did I tell you we went to the mosque together? Zayeed and Farah were a beautiful couple. I wish you’d have met them. Their baby is due in March. I really miss them.”

“Where’s Farah now?” Bill asked.

“She’s with her family in Michigan. When I left her after the funeral, she told me she didn’t blame me for Zayeed’s death. I have a hard time believing that. I mean I blame myself for what happened, why shouldn’t she? At least she has a little part of Zayeed to comfort her.”

As they walked and Rhoda gave voice to her feelings, she felt a great burden lifting from her heart and mind. Just sharing her

grief and guilt made them easier to deal with, easier to bear, and she began to wonder just how much else in life would be made easier with a partner who listened and cared. When they got back to the casino, they decided to continue their conversation in Bill's room. When they got to the room, they decided conversation wasn't really what they wanted after all.

The next morning, Rhoda took Bill with her to her mother's house in Odanah to meet Dancing Bear and her two brothers. Breakfast was a cross-cultural experience for Bill. Dancing Bear laid out a spread of Chippewa favorites—wild rice, venison, and the ubiquitous fry bread, and to make Bill feel welcome, she also served corn flakes and scrambled eggs. Mike and Charlie were there and both found Bill easy to talk to and easy to like. Mike was especially interested in Bill's stories of life as a cop. "Security isn't all that much different," he concluded, and Bill agreed. While the men chatted, Rhoda and Dancing Bear packed a picnic lunch, and Dancing Bear said to Rhoda in the Chippewa language, "He looks like a good man. Strong. Kind. Too bad he's not Ojibwa." Rhoda blushed and silently thanked her grandmother for her approval. After breakfast, Rhoda drove Bill to one of the many marshy inlets that dot the margin of Lake Superior. On the shore was a boathouse, and a narrow pier extended into the lake. She unlocked the boathouse, and Bill helped her carry a flat-bottomed aluminum boat to the water's edge. They loaded the boat with the picnic basket and some crude-looking wooden implements. When Bill asked "What are those for," Rhoda told him, "Just wait and see."

The lake was thick with grass and reeds, and Rhoda pushed the boat through them with a long pole. After a little while, she asked Bill if he'd like to give it a try. "Sure," he said.

With Bill poling and Rhoda directing, they soon arrived at a reedy area that looked absolutely no different from any other, to Bill's eyes. But Rhoda recognized the spot and had him slow down. She then picked up the two baseball bat-sized sticks she had brought from the boathouse and used one to bend the reeds over

until they filled the bow of the boat. Then, she used the other stick to strike the reeds. Hundreds of seeds fell into the boat. Bill poled a little farther, and Rhoda repeated the action. Bend and strike and pole. In almost no time, they developed a rhythm, and the floor of the boat filled with long thin seeds.

“This is wild rice,” Rhoda said. “My people have been gathering it for a thousand years. This is my clan’s traditional gathering ground. These seeds are not really rice at all; they’re more like a grain or a big grass seed. It’s a very nutritious food, and it has kept the Chippewa fed through many a harsh winter.

“What I’m doing is the traditional method of rice harvesting. It’s a two-person operation. One person poles the boat, and the other strikes the stalks. You notice the grass is not harmed and plenty of seeds fall into the lake to replenish the reed bed. Today, this is called sustainable agriculture, but it’s something the Chippewa have been practicing forever.

“Once the rice is harvested, it’s dried in the sun for a few days, and then the grain is made to dance. That’s what we call it; the Europeans call it ‘winnowing.’ We toss the rice in the air, and the wind carries off the chaff. When the rice is clean, it must be toasted over low heat. It’s a very labor-intensive process, but the end result is a most delicious and desirable food. Before the casino was built, wild rice was our main cash crop. These are some of the richest wild rice fields in the world.”

“That’s really interesting, Rhoda,” said Bill. “I’m really interested in your people and your history. What a lovely way to spend an afternoon.”

“It’s fun for a day, but it’s a damn hard way to make a living.”

Back at the lodge, they showered and made love. Lying next to Bill, Rhoda opened up and spoke some more about what was really bothering her. “I was reckless. I acted like it was a game and it didn’t have any consequences. I thought I was being smart and brave, but all I did was get my friend killed. Now Farah is a

widow. I don't think I can face her ever again. I don't think I can be a cop anymore. In the two years I've been doing this cop thing, I've had to kill one person and managed to get a friend killed. You've been a cop for, what, eighteen years, and you don't have any blood on your hands. I'm thinking of resigning. I don't want to do this anymore."

Bill listened in silence while Rhoda spoke. When she was finished, he said, "No one can tell you what to do, Rhoda, least of all me. It's true I've never had to shoot anyone, but I've seen my share of violence. Most cops I know make it through to retirement without seeing the things you've seen and done. We have dangerous jobs, and it can turn ugly in a heartbeat. A cop, even a wildlife cop, puts his life on the line every day. That's why they give us guns— so we have a fighting chance against the nasty stuff that's out there.

"It's a thankless job, and you either have the stomach for it or you don't. You've already done more than your share, Rhoda. If you quit, no one will blame you. As for your guilt about Zayeed, blaming yourself is a waste of time. Zayeed was a cop, too. He knew the risks when he put on his uniform. He died in the line of duty; it's what cops do. You're not responsible for the way things turned out. Sure, you could have done some things differently, but that goes for any complex situation. You made some good decisions and some bad decisions. You know what that makes you? Human, that's what it makes you. Beating yourself up over what's done strikes me as a waste of time. I think you acted heroically, and millions of people are better off because of what you did."

This was the longest sustained speech Rhoda had ever heard Bill deliver. When he finished, there were tears in her eyes. She leaned over and kissed him.

That night, they were joined for dinner by Sam Pritchard, her surviving agent, and Esther Margolis, the forest ranger, who drove up from Whitlesey Creek at Rhoda's invitation. Esther and Sam were excited and could hardly wait to tell Rhoda that they

were engaged. Esther showed off her tiny diamond ring. Bill ordered a bottle of sparkling wine, and they all raised their glasses to the future. It was a fabulous night filled with nature talk and cop talk. Bill told an abbreviated version of the hitchhiker story, which reminded him to tell Rhoda the latest news of Paco, who now ran his own landscaping business in Milwaukee. "He's employing twelve people; can you believe it? He's quite the success story. Where else but in America?"

Rhoda didn't mention her adventures with the LPA; instead she told them about her afternoon on the lake with Bill harvesting wild rice. "We made a good team. We brought in twenty pounds."

"We do make a good team, don't we?" said Bill.

Rhoda looked down at her coffee cup and blushed.



Part three

# A BUSINESS OF EAGLES



## Chapter 36

It was a beautiful late summer day in August, a couple of weeks after Bill and Rhoda's magic weekend at the casino. They spoke every few days now. Rhoda would call just to say hello. Bill was surprised how he looked forward to those calls. He would think about Rhoda while he patrolled Oconee or while he waited for speeders on the highway. It was on just such a day of wistful dreaming that Bill's mind was snapped back to reality by the streak of a car speeding past.

Life is full of odd coincidences. If it was Bill's day off, or if he were anywhere else that day, he never would have seen the speeder barreling down Route 7, and this story would never have happened. If it were Harvey on duty that evening, the speeder would have gone on his way, unrecognized, with only a speeding ticket to remind him of the incident. But by chance or luck or intelligent design, it was Bill O'Halleran who pulled over the black Lexus. To be fair, Bill didn't recognize the short, middle-aged driver at first. In the two years since Bill had last seen Arthur Levine, his appearance had changed considerably.

Bill had a good memory for faces and, in spite of the toupee and goatee Arthur had affected since their last meeting, he recognized the younger brother and accountant to the late unlamented crime boss, Gerald Levine, who was found electrocuted in

his hot tub several months after the big tropical bird bust. As Bill approached the Lexus, he said, “Hello, Mr. Levine. You know you were doing eighty? The limit’s fifty-five. License and registration, please.”

As Arthur handed over the documents, Bill picked up signs of nervousness. Arthur was sweaty, and his hands shook. The driver’s license photo bore Arthur’s likeness, but the name on the license was Ira Trackman. The car was registered to a Mr. Phil Esposito. Bill leaned into the window and said, “You changed your name to Trackman? Please stay right here while I write up a citation.”

Bill walked back to his patrol car. He remembered the trouble federal and state prosecutors had in trying to make a case against Gerald Levine, thanks in large part to his army of high-priced legal talent. The last he heard was that the feds were working up an indictment for income tax evasion. What Bill didn’t know was that with Gerald Levine’s death, the feds came down hard on Arthur. Without his brother’s financial resources and ruthless nature to help him ward off the Justice Department, Arthur was charged with a dozen counts of money laundering, racketeering, conspiracy, smuggling, and attempted murder—many felonies, carrying many decades of prison time.

To avoid spending his remaining days behind bars, Arthur struck a deal with the federal authorities and agreed to cooperate. His testimony proved to be a bonanza for the prosecutors. As Gerald’s accountant, Arthur had access to the names and records of the criminals involved in his big brother’s many nefarious enterprises. Arthur implicated crooked bankers, bent cops, corrupt politicians, and an assortment of sleazy underworld figures. Gerald, it seemed, had his greedy fingers in a wide variety of dirty businesses—prostitution, bookmaking, smuggling, arson, and stolen goods.

The federal prosecutors were happy. They got to bring a half-dozen cases to trial and won as many convictions. Arthur testified at them all. As a reward for his cooperation, Arthur was given three years’ probation and placed in witness protection. He

changed his appearance and was given the identity of Ira Trackman. He was resettled in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he supposedly was working as a tax preparer for H & R Block.

The straight life didn't suit him, and after a few months, Arthur slipped back into his criminal ways and was now performing highly suspect accounting for a new set of crooks. He had reinvented himself exactly where he started—as a small-time criminal accountant. This time, he was working for the Phoenix Corporation, a front company for the mob. Phoenix Corp owned and managed a couple of dozen Indian casinos in ten states. They were awash in money, skimming from all of them. The legitimate front company and its accounting department was inspected and audited regularly. Arthur's behind-the-scenes accounting department kept a private, but entirely more accurate, set of books.

After work on this particular day, Arthur's boss asked him for a favor. "Hey, Artie, how wouldja like to drive Mr. Esposito's Lexus to Detroit?"

"Sure," said Arthur, who felt flattered to be offered the extra responsibility. Doing a favor for higher-ups couldn't be a bad career move, could it? Besides, Arthur liked a day out of the office as well as the next guy.

Bill sat in his patrol car and wrote up the speeding ticket. As he wrote, he waited for the computer to run a check on the plate number and driver's name. Bill's computer beeped and he read that the plates should be bolted on to a 2002 Chevy Blazer belonging to a Mrs. Devona Jessup of Battle Creek, Michigan. She reported them stolen six months previously. For Ira Trackman, the computer reported "no warrants," but for Phil Esposito, the computer listed a long criminal history including outstanding warrants in several states.

Bill walked back to Arthur's car and had him get out and assume the position—hands on the hood and legs wide apart. Bill patted him down, cuffed his hands behind his back, and walked him to the patrol car.

"Am I under arrest?" asked Arthur.

“Not quite yet,” said Bill, “but your car has stolen plates, and I need to see what you have in there. So you just sit tight, and I’ll be right back,”

Bill went back to the Lexus and looked in the glove compartment, where he saw nothing but paper and junk. Under the driver’s seat, however, he found a thirty-eight caliber revolver, which he dropped into an evidence bag. In the trunk, he discovered two large duffel bags filled with stacks of hundred dollar bills.

Bill locked the Lexus and walked back to his car, the duffel bags slung over his shoulder. He stashed the bags of cash in his trunk. Bill asked Arthur if he had a permit to carry a pistol. When Arthur replied that he didn’t, Bill read Arthur his rights and told him he was arresting him for possession of an illegal firearm.

“There was a gun under the seat?” asked an incredulous Arthur. “I had no idea it was there. Who looks under the seat? And how should I know about the license plates? This isn’t my car. I’m just doing a friend a favor and delivering it. I never should have left the interstate. Damn, that was stupid.” Arthur’s voice was filled with fear and panic as he said these things to Bill.

“You can explain all this to your lawyer. I can’t let you drive off until all this gets straightened out.” Bill radioed in to the state police that he had made an arrest and was bringing the suspect to the nearest lockup, which in this instance was in Milwaukee.

On the drive to Milwaukee, Arthur’s panic increased. He said, “They’ll kill me, you know. If I don’t show up in Detroit with this car and that money, they’ll hunt me down and shoot me. You don’t understand who you’re dealing with here.”

“Who’ll kill you?” asked Bill.

“The guys whose money this is. The mob. The people I work for. They’re expecting delivery tomorrow. If I don’t show up, they’ll kill me.”

“Well, you’re not going to show up. You’re going to be in a Milwaukee courtroom explaining to a judge why he shouldn’t lock you away.”

“My God, no. Not jail. They’ll really kill me in jail. All those guys I ratted out, the guys who worked with my brother. They all know it was me put them there. I testified at their trials, for Christ sakes. The only reason I’m alive now was I’ve been in witness protection for the last two years.”

“Ah. That explains the new name,” Bill mused. “I suspect the FBI is also going to be pretty pissed with you. They’re not going to look too kindly at one of their witnesses getting back in the game.”

“Oh, God, I’m really screwed,” Ira/Arthur banged his head on the window. “Screwed. Screwed. Screwed. What am I gonna do?”

Bill felt a pang of sympathy for the little guy. After a few second’s thought he said, “Well, I suppose you could always turn state’s evidence again. Rat out your current employer, or even better, offer to go undercover and help them build a case.”

“You know, that’s not a bad idea. I could cut a deal. This time I’ll have them send me to Hawaii. I’m sick of these cold climates. You really think this could work?”

“Doesn’t seem like you have anything to lose, does it? Besides, it’s probably the only chance you’ve got. Who do you work for, anyway?”

“You ever hear of the Phoenix Corporation?” said Arthur with a little more confidence. “They’re big. Own a couple of dozen Indian casinos around the country. They take in millions of dollars every day. Manage to steal most of it, too. No taxes. Sweet operation. They have half the politicians in their pocket. It’s really a beautiful racket.”

“I’m sure,” Bill said. “But I thought the Indians owned their own casinos.”

“Yeah, sure, like you own your house—except for the mortgage. The Indians own their own moccasins; that’s about it. The mob gets all the gravy, the Indians get bupkes.”

“Hmm, interesting,” said Bill. “You ever hear of a casino on the Bad River Reservation, way up north?”

“Oh, sure. That’s one of ours. It’s a small one. Doesn’t pull in enough dough. Phoenix is shutting it down the end of October. Most of the money I was hauling was from there. The company is draining the cash out before they walk away.”

“You mean they’re just going to abandon their investment? Don’t they have obligations, contracts?”

“You think these guys care about contracts? The only contract they care about is the one they’ll be taking out on me. Phoenix doesn’t give a shit about the Indians. Even a little casino like Bad River probably paid off its investment after the first couple of years. These guys are all about the money. Casino’s got to pull down fifty million a year, minimum. The mob skims half. Bad River’s only doing thirty, thirty-five million a year. Not enough. She’s a goner.”

“I have friends that work there,” Bill said.

“Well, they’ll be looking for jobs come October thirty-first.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“I’m in a position to know.”

## CHAPTER 37

Bill delivered Arthur/Ira to his fate. When he got back to Oconee and home, he called Rhoda on her cell phone. Even with no cell phone reception on the reservation, Bill knew his voice-mail message would reach Rhoda eventually. Rhoda checked her messages whenever she was in town. Next, Bill called his office and just caught Rita as she was about to leave for the day.

“Hi, Bill. I have my coat on. What’s up?”

“Hey, Rita, I have a favor to ask, a little research job. If you have a minute, could you see what you can dig up on a Phoenix Corporation? They’re big into Indian casinos. I’d like to know more about them and especially their interest in the Bad River Casino up near Ashland.”

“I’ll work on it tonight at home. You know, you really ought to join the twenty-first century, Bill. Computers are fun.”

“Fun for you, maybe. Thanks, Rita. You’re indispensable.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the girls.”

The next morning, there was a neatly printed report on Bill’s desk. Rita had written that the Phoenix Corporation was a privately held corporation registered in Delaware. It was primarily involved in leisure activities and entertainment. Apart from a few side interests, casino gambling was their main focus. Founded in



1991, the company had made a profit every year. It had a distinguished board of directors, which included several hotshot business executives, a couple of prominent politicians, and a movie star. It had a triple A bond rating. The company grossed two billion dollars the previous year. It was rumored that the company was owned by the Esposito family of New Jersey. The Espositos were linked to organized crime.

In Wisconsin, Rita wrote, Phoenix ran five casinos. The smallest of them was the one at Bad River, completed in 2002. The Bad River Casino cost approximately fifteen million dollars to build and earned between twenty-five and thirty-five million dollars a year. All Phoenix's other properties in the state grossed between fifty and seventy million dollars a year.

Rita had expanded her research to include general information about the Indian gaming situation. She wrote that as far as casinos go, the Bad River Lodge and Casino was no great shakes. There are approximately four hundred casinos on Indian land in the U. S. The Bad River Casino was one of the smallest. Indian gaming in America is a huge business by anyone's measure. Last year, it grossed over eighteen billion dollars. That's more than the combined receipts for the NFL, NBA, and professional baseball for the same year, she noted. Considering that there are less than two million Native Americans in the U.S., it would seem that they'd all be rolling in money. Sadly, the opposite is true. The Indian tribes are among the poorest people in the nation.

Bill wondered why the Indians weren't rich. After all, they owned the casinos and the casinos were making all this money. What had gone wrong? He shook his head and returned to Rita's report. The original intent of the Indian Gaming Act, the report continued, was to funnel money to the tribes to help ease the appalling conditions that have persisted since the United States was founded. Once the Indians were defeated and their land appropriated, the government, and by extension, the American people, could safely neglect them. And that was exactly what they did for the next two hundred years.

The report added that the end result of all this neglect was that the state of health, education, and employment on America's tribal lands became a national disgrace—and then the opportunity to exploit the Indians further came along. The Indian Gaming Act of 1978 was an attempt to give the Indians a chance to make money without it actually costing the American taxpayer anything. The act gave the tribes jurisdiction over certain forms of gambling. It was a foot in the door for the wholesale exploitation that was to follow.

The government further expanded Indian gaming in 1982, legalizing casino gambling on Indian land, Rita went on. Because the five hundred sixty-four federally recognized Indian tribes were sovereign nations, the federal government granted them the right to open casinos even where it was prohibited by state law. So far, two hundred twenty-four tribes have opened four hundred casinos. There are nineteen casinos in Wisconsin alone; the Bad River Casino was one of them.

The report concluded that while the original Indian Gaming Acts may have been well intended, in practice they have not served their intended purpose. After two centuries of neglect, the tribes were so poor and uneducated that building and running a modern casino was quite beyond their means and abilities. So how did the Indians pull it off? How did the poorest of the poor get the money and the expertise to build and run so many casinos? They did what all good Americans do—they borrowed it.

Rita had also noted that banks like safe investments, so if you're a small Indian tribe lucky enough to live on a reservation anywhere near a large population center, you would find no shortage of investors only too happy to help you out. For a hefty share of the profits, a tribe could build a casino and hire a staff to run it. Unfortunately, all those deals came with strings attached. Lots of nasty strings. In actuality, the Indians do little more than rent out their name, their land, and their sovereignty and collect a pittance in return. The lion's share of the profit winds up in the pockets of some pretty unsavory investors. It could safely be said that Indian

gaming has been the greatest gift to organized crime since the founding of Las Vegas.

Bill finished reading the report and thought to himself that everything Arthur told him was true. He was not sure how the news would impact Rhoda personally, but he was certain that it would be bad news for the reservation. A little advance warning might prove useful to Rhoda's friends and relations.

The next morning, Tuesday, Bill went to work and waited all day for his phone to ring. Late that afternoon, it did. It was Rhoda.

"Hi Bill, I got your message. How are you?"

"I'm good. It's nice to hear your voice. How are you doing?"

"I'm feeling better, stronger. I think of you a lot."

"Same here, Rhoda. I'd like to see you sometime soon."

"Could you get away this weekend? My grandmother is having a wiisini."

"A what?"

"A wiisini. A party. For me. She thinks I need to see how many people care about me."

"Well, you could add me to that list. I care."

"That's nice to hear, Bill. Do you think you could come? I know it's a haul, but I'd love to see you here."

"When is it, exactly?"

"Saturday evening."

"I could drive up Saturday morning, stay over, and drive back on Sunday. Could you find a room for me?"

"I'll book a room at the casino like last time."

"Great, I'll see you there." Bill decided to hold off on telling Rhoda his news regarding the casino's closing until he saw her in person.

Compared with the grand gambling palaces of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, and even with other Indian casinos, the casino

the Bad River Chippewa built on their reservation was a modest affair. Even so, it still cost nearly fifteen million dollars to build and furnish. Its hotel had only fifty rooms, and while there were rooms for receptions and conventions, there was no nightclub. There was, however, a restaurant and a gift shop. The gift shop sold Native American handicrafts, some made locally, and some made in China. A three story-structure with rooms and offices upstairs, it had a rustic style and resembled a big log cabin.

The front entrance opened on an art gallery-cum-museum. The walls were covered with paintings of Native Americans at work and play. Several cases displayed outstanding examples of Chippewa art. Each glass case contained one of the tribe's treasures. The centerpiece of the collection was an absolutely awesome headdress mounted on the wall in a climate-controlled glass frame. The headdress had been made as a tribute to a long-dead Chippewa chief to commemorate the Chippewa's great victory over the Iroquois. It was a stunning piece of work, and the casino had it insured for \$300,000. The whole exhibit was valued at more than a half-million dollars.

These precious artifacts were on perpetual loan to the casino, much to the chagrin of the remaining traditionals on the reservation. To them, these objects were sacred relics containing strong magic and still useful in living ceremonies. Aside from that, the treasures represented the tribe's pride and history; they were not just another thing to be exploited for the amusement of the white man.

On the twenty thousand square feet of gaming floor stood a few hundred slot machines and a dozen gaming tables. The tables offered blackjack, roulette, and three kinds of poker. The slot machines earned the bulk of the casino's money, raking in some thirty million dollars a year. The tables accounted for another five million. This, too, was considered small time in a world where the largest Indian casinos pulled in well over a billion dollars a year. Still, thirty-five million dollars a year was a lot of money, and a half a million visitors a year was a lot of people. So small though it

was, the Bad River Lodge and Casino faced the same problems and needed as much security and vigilance as the big boys.

All casinos face similar problems when it comes to security. All that cash flowing through all those slots and gaming tables is an irresistible temptation to all manner of thieves and scammers. Gambling even tempts honest players who otherwise wouldn't think of taking something that wasn't theirs. Over the years, the casinos have learned the scams and have evolved sophisticated countermeasures to thwart them. The scammers, in turn, have refined their techniques. Despite the sophisticated security, scammers still managed to bilk casinos out of hundreds of millions of dollars each year. It is a cat and mouse game that will never end.

The casinos have many levels of surveillance, as well as databases of known scam artists and thieves. In some casinos, face recognition software is used to spot an unwanted face in the crowd. These days, you have to be very good to pull one over on a casino.

Casino security is generally divided into two major departments: security and surveillance. The security department is charged with keeping the gaming floor calm and peaceful and preventing anything from disturbing the players. The security people do crowd control, break up fights, escort drunks to their rooms, and in general, perform a variety of crowd-control duties. They are the muscle in the casino, uniformed young men in white shirts and blue blazers positioned around the floor with wires in their ears. It is basically a cop's job, and many of the tribal people, upon whose property the casino sits, are hired for this duty. About twenty-five per cent of an Indian casino's workforce is hired from the local tribe's vast pool of unemployed.

Bad River's head of security was Neal Arnold, fifty-five, a beefy ex-Philadelphia cop and no-nonsense professional. He headed a staff of seventy tough young men and women, only ten of whom were Native Americans; the remainder were just plain Americans.

Rhoda's younger brother, Mike, worked as a security guard

on the casino floor. He wore a navy blazer and a white shirt, red tie, and black pants. There was a walkie-talkie clipped to his waist and a microphone in his ear. He heard a steady stream of directions from his section chief, Dominick Albani. All day he heard in his ear: “security to table six, drunk and disorderly,” or “security to the restaurant, see the manager,” or “disturbance in sector three, Mike, check it out.” It was a mind-numbing job until something ugly happened. But that was how all police work was, and Mike liked to think of himself as a cop.

Security was one of the few casino jobs open to the reservation’s young men. Mike Deerwalker dropped out of high school in his sophomore year, the same year the casino opened. He landed a quota job in the kitchen and worked his way up to waiter. When a job in security opened up, Mike jumped at it. He liked feeling like a cop. It reminded him of his big sister and her job as a cop with Fish & Wildlife. The previous year, he got his GED, and this year he was taking courses in criminal justice at the community college in Ashland.

These efforts at self-improvement were wholeheartedly supported by Rhoda, whose college scholarship and biology degree were the pride of the reservation. As Rhoda’s younger brother, Mike always labored in his sister’s shadow. People always expected him to perform as well as her in school. He never could. The result had been more than a little jealousy and rebellion.

Surveillance was the casino’s other big weapon in its arsenal against thieves and scammers. Bad River’s head of surveillance was Gary Standinghorse, sixty-eight, an Oglala Sioux from South Dakota, who had worked every job in casino surveillance in a career spanning thirty-six years. He had a staff of sixty professionals under his command. He took the job at Bad River to take it easy in his declining years and to be nearer to home.

Between Arnold in security and Standinghorse in surveillance, they had sixty years of experience. There was little they hadn’t seen. Bad River may have been a small casino but it had a

staff that could keep a big Vegas casino secure.

The dealer was the surveillance department's first of four lines of defense against cheaters and scam artists. An alert dealer was the casino's most effective weapon. If a dealer felt something was not quite right, he had a variety of silent alarms to summon his pit boss or call in the eye in the sky. In Charley Deerwalker's four years of dealing blackjack, he had busted a few cheaters. He caught card counters and card markers. He'd seen close up card manipulators who could palm and switch a card in the blink of an eye. He'd seen the distraction experts who diverted the dealer's attention just long enough to snag a couple of chips from someone else's stack.

Charley Deerwalker, Rhoda's older brother, was a different story altogether from his siblings. Two years older than Rhoda, Charley was always a troubled soul. He ran with a tough crowd. After his mother died, he spent half his teens in trouble with the law. His was a familiar story on the reservation, where the incidence of alcoholism and suicide was many times the national average and the high school dropout rate was astronomical. Reservation life offered little but poverty and hopelessness. It was only a matter of time until Charley was jailed or killed.

It was, in fact, a bar fight that finally got Charley turned around. No one remembered what the fight was about, but shouts led to fists, and fists to knives and bottles. The broken bottle in Charley's hand wound up in some cowboy's neck. The judge gave Charley the choice of jail or the Marines. He took the latter. He saw action in the first Gulf War and left the corps a decorated sergeant. At age twenty-six, Charley found himself sober, straight, law abiding, and unemployed. When he returned to the reservation, the casino was still six months away from opening. Charley used his GI benefits to pay his tuition at dealer school. He was hired immediately when the casino opened.

The pit boss was the second line of defense in the casino's war against cheating. The pit boss watched the dealer. Much of

the serious cheating that went on came from a dealer-player alliance. There were a thousand ways for a crooked dealer to screw the house, the simplest being to overpay his accomplice or pay on a losing hand, or even harder to detect, to signal his hand through subtle gestures or facial expressions. If a dealer could signal a high or low hand to a player, the player could adjust his bets accordingly. And last, a dealer bent on cheating could manipulate the cards themselves and deal a winning hand to his accomplice.

Over the years, the casinos have developed rules and procedures to protect themselves. All electronic devices that might aid a card counter were banned from the gaming floor. Blackjack players could no longer remove their cards from the table, which made it harder to palm or switch a card. The dealer now dealt from a shoe holding several shuffled decks, another deterrent to card counters. After a clear signal from the dealer, bets could not be changed or the chips touched. Chips could only be bought at specified times during a game to prevent the dealer from being distracted. The casinos adapted as the thieves got more inventive. It was the continuing struggle of predator and prey.

The third line of defense in the casino was the floor manager. He watched the pit bosses and was in constant contact with the surveillance control room. The floor manager watched the big picture on the casino floor. He was alert for teams of cheaters and could direct the cameras and security people to trouble spots.

The fourth and final layer of defense was the surveillance control room itself. The hundreds of cameras covering every inch of the gaming floor, including the cashier's cages, had their corresponding screens in this room. Dozens of trained professionals watched all the action on the floor. Everything was recorded. The people who watched the tables were once dealers themselves and knew what moves and scams to watch for. If someone was winning too often, the play was recorded and reviewed. Was that dealer signaling? Were cards being switched? The cameras could be panned



and zoomed. Filters could be applied to look for infrared beams or lasers. A scam artist had to be original and clever to put something over on a casino.

## CHAPTER 38

Dwight Hightower was the casino manager. Tall and thin, he was built like a high tower. He represented the shady business interests that built and financed Bad River and four similar casinos around the state. He was called “tight white flower” by the Indian employees behind his back. He was a strict boss and a tough manager who kept the casino running in the black in spite of the high percentage of rake-off taken by his employers. And there was plenty of rake-off to go around. The real owners of the casino, the Espositos, sucked several million a year off the top in spite of the careful state oversight to which all casinos were subject.

On this particular morning, Dwight Hightower was meeting with Joe Twotrees, Bad River’s tribal president. Joe Twotrees was the closest thing to a career politician the reservation had. He was in his mid fifties and had learned life’s lessons the hard way. Unschoolled and a lifelong resident of the reservation, he knew instinctively that politics was an exercise in compromise and that some compromises could be advantageous for himself and his family. Anyway, Joe had been tribal chief for as long as anyone could remember, automatically getting elected and re-elected time after time. The lion’s share of Bad River’s voters lived far off the reservation and just kept voting Joe in year after year.

Hightower and Twotrees had been meeting once a month

since the casino was finished. The public reason for the meetings was billed as tribal cooperation and coordination, but the real reason was the cash-stuffed envelope that Hightower slid across his desk to Twotrees.

The money, ten thousand dollars, was to keep Twotrees and his four-person tribal council happy, a public relations expense to make sure the council kept a lid on any resentment the tribe may feel toward the casino. This was only the first of many envelopes Hightower would dispense this day. He had an envelope for State Representative James Mackie, or rather for Mackie's reelection committee; another for State Senator "Big" Carl Huber's political action committee; a third and fourth envelope for their federal counterparts: the Democratic representative from the fourteenth congressional district and most important, the U.S. senator, Harold R. Russell (R. WI), whose membership on the Ways and Means Committee made him the Phoenix Corporation's most important political ally. All of these political contributions were to insure that the bureaucrats who oversaw the half-dozen state and federal gaming enforcement agencies stayed off Hightower's back. These donations were part of the cost of doing business, and just like the light bill, were just another expense for the casino.

At this particular meeting, Hightower had some other business to discuss with the tribal leader. "You know, Joe, It's already the middle of August. It's soon time for the big harvest powwow." Joe Twotrees sat immobile as Hightower continued stating the obvious. "I'm thinking this year we might try something different." The annual event, the rice harvest powwow to which Hightower was referring, took place every September in Odanah. The festival predated the casino by two hundred years. In more recent times, the rice harvest was the biggest moneymaking enterprise on the reservation. A successful harvest was always followed with a feast and celebration, which was called a pau wau in Ashininabe, the native tongue.

Hightower said, "I don't have to tell you it's the biggest weekend of the year, Joe. Big weekends mean big business for the

whole town and especially for the casino.”

Twotrees nodded, “Big weekend.”

“Well, here’s what I was thinking. This year I want to put up a pavilion in the parking lot. You know, a big tent. Put in some seats and bring some of the local Indian color to the casino. You know what I mean? Like a show, have some of your people in their great Indian costumes, feathers, beads, the whole shebang, chanting and singing. Tourists eat that stuff up. So what do you think, Joe? Are you with me on this?”

“What is it you want from me?” responded a taciturn Twotrees, sensing political trouble.

“You know, send me some dancers. That way, I could keep my customers close by and they’ll put more money in the slots. They won’t have to travel the six miles to Odanah. Of course, there’ll be a little something extra in it for the council.”

Of course, if they didn’t travel to the reservation, they wouldn’t be spending anything on the reservation, either, but Hightower had the good sense not to voice that thought.

“So what do you say, Joe?” asked Hightower.

“I guess. I don’t see why not,” said Joe Twotrees, getting up to leave.

“That’s great, Joe. I’ll have Ricki give your girl a call and coordinate the details.”

Ricki was Veronica Rice, Hightower’s secretary, a local Ashland beauty whose mother was Chippewa and whose father was a Lutheran dairy farmer. Ricki had been the prom queen in high school and the Rice Queen at the Ashland dairy festival three years running. She was a tall leggy blond and would have made a fine Las Vegas showgirl. She had dreams of a Hollywood career but had no acting talent. Her beauty and her dreams never got her out of Wisconsin.

The meeting over, Joe Twotrees walked back to his car. David Nightsky, his driver, was waiting for him beside the gleaming new Lincoln. David, in full chauffeur’s mufti, got behind the wheel

and waited for Joe to tell him where to go next. The tribal president got in and said “office,” and away they went. Nightsky felt foolish in his uniform. In another time he might have been a chief himself, but this was now and he was lucky to have a job on the reservation at all.

The office was a modern brick building, recently completed right in the heart of Odanah. It looked as out of place as a ship would among Odanah’s old, peeling clapboard houses. Just the sight of the brick monstrosity made the reservation residents sick and angry, but with the voting majority living off the rez, Joe Twotrees got to spend the tribe’s money the way he wanted. So, instead of building a school or a new clinic for his desperately poor constituents, he built a monument to himself: the Joseph Twotrees Tribal Office Building. It made the families still living on the reservation furious.

Once inside the new building, Joe Twotrees made the rounds, visiting the offices of his four council members in turn. At each visit, the same small ceremony was performed. Joe knocked, entered, and made small talk for a few minutes. When he left, there was an envelope on each desk. There was a thousand dollars cash in each one. Each councilor assumed that their president got somewhat more. How much more, they had no idea.

Tight White Flower leaned back in his big chair behind his big desk and buzzed for Ricki on the intercom. Ricki was bored, as usual, and was busying herself with unscheduled fingernail maintenance. When the intercom summoned her, she dropped her nail file and strutted into Hightower’s office. Her long legs and gorgeous body never failed to give Hightower a hard-on.

“You rang,” said Ricki.

Hightower said, “Yeah, Ricki, honey, would you call the council office and find out who’s running the powwow this year? When you find out, get them on the phone and buzz me so I can talk to them, okay?”

“Okay, Boss.”

A few minutes later, Ricki called over the intercom, "I have Nora Nightsky on the phone, Mr. Hightower."

Hightower picked up the phone. "How are you, Nora; how's it going?"

"Something I can do for you Mr. Hightower?" Nora asked, already annoyed at having to even speak with the hated casino. Nora was a rabid traditional, the tribe's historian and publisher of *The Kingfisher*, the tribe's sporadic newsletter. She was also in charge of organizing the annual powwow and had been for as long as anyone could remember.

"Yes, Nora, there is. I was just speaking with Joe Twotrees this morning, and he thought it would be a good idea if you could schedule a few hours of dancing and drumming over here at the casino. Sort of a little taste of what the Pow Wow is all about. You know, kind of give the tourists a thrill. You know what I mean? Anyway, Joe thought it was a good idea."

"I'll bet he did," mumbled Nora under her breath.

"How's that?"

"I said I think we could arrange for a dance or two, but I hate to take paying customers away from the real powwow. The reservation really needs the money."

"Yeah, sure" said Hightower, "I'm not asking for the moon here, only for a couple of dances. If they want to see more dancing, they can take the shuttle bus over there like last year."

"Well, I guess I could schedule a couple of groups. I could send the Chippewa Girls Heritage Group over on Thursday morning. How does that sound?"

"I like the young girl idea, but who wants to see Indians dancing on a Thursday morning? No offense, but late afternoon is more what I had in mind, and more like Thursday, Friday, and Saturday afternoon would be really super."

"Geez, that's the heart of the whole weekend. I'm going to have to juggle groups around to accommodate you. Let me see what I can do. I'll get back to you."

"Okay, Nora. I'm sure you can work it out. I'll tell Joe

you've been most cooperative." Hightower hung up the phone and buzzed the intercom for Ricki.

## CHAPTER 39

Rhoda had been living in her old room in her family's house in Odanah for three weeks. If she had been asked what she was doing, she would have said that she was "sorting things out." She needed to think about her future and what she wanted out of life. She grieved for Zayeed and still had nightmares from shooting Hugo Dunn, but she was healing. The peace and calm of her childhood home was just the stress-free respite she needed. Dancing Bear sensed this and so had announced one morning last week that on Saturday next they would host a "wiisini" to welcome Rhoda back. In Ashininabe, "wiisini" literally means "to eat," but in this context, it meant a party.

Despite the lack of modern communications on the reservation, word of the wiisini spread among clan members with astonishing speed. So on Saturday morning, people Rhoda barely knew started arriving at the little house. Distant relatives, clan members, cousins, and old high school friends assembled in large numbers. Everyone liked a wiisini, and in short order, the house and yard were filled to overflowing with happy well-wishers, tables of food, and enough cold beer to float a barge. It was a marvel and a joy to Rhoda to see how her people admired her. She was held up as an example to the children, and this gave her an embarrassed pride.

"Stay in school and do your lessons, and you just might



make something of yourself and get off this reservation like Rhoda Deerwalker did,” she heard as she walked by a group of adults and children.

The day before the party, Rhoda and her grandmother prepared a few traditional dishes of wild rice, summer squash, corn balls, and venison. It was enough food for ten or twelve people, not nearly enough for the sixty-three people who showed up, but in the great tradition of the wiisini, people brought dish after dish of the hearty simple foods the reservation provided— walleye and trout, wild rice prepared a dozen different ways, venison and bear, corn balls, and of course, fry bread, a universal favorite.

It was a five-hour drive from Oconee to Ashland. Bill stopped at the lodge to check into his room and freshen up before driving over to the reservation. He took a shower, changed his shirt, and then drove the five miles into Odanah.

There was already quite a mob of people filling the little house and spilling into the yard. The first person who saw him was Charley Deerwalker, Rhoda’s older brother. Charley slapped Bill on the back and put a cold beer in his hand. “Welcome. Glad you could make it. Food’s out back if you’re hungry.”

“Who are all these people?” asked Bill.

“Loon clan, mostly” replied Charley. ”Make yourself at home. Rhoda’s inside.”

Bill spotted Rhoda in the crowded kitchen cooking corn balls. She was laughing and joking with aunts and cousins. She saw him and gave him a smile. She motioned for him to go outside and mingle. “I’ll be right out,” she mouthed.

The little house was overflowing with noise and life; gangs of children ran laughing inside and out. There was beer and music in the yard, laughter and good fellowship everywhere. It was a wonderful homecoming for Rhoda, and she glowed from the joyous energy of it all. Everyone Rhoda knew and loved from her youth were there, as were a host of people connected through clan ties. She saw Ron Blackbird, her old high school sweetheart, talk-

ing with some cousins by the barbecue. He was there with his very pregnant wife, Vera. They were deeply engaged in conversation with a bunch of young people she dimly remembered; she took Bill's arm and joined them. The group peppered her with questions about her experiences, but soon enough, the talk turned to reservation politics, rumors, and casino gossip.

Rhoda heard for the first time of the active A.I.M. (American Indian Movement) presence on the reservation and its mysterious leader known only as Binay, or Bird in the native tongue. The common belief was that it was Binay and his followers who burned down the old church school a few months earlier and kidnapped and more than likely murdered, Father Fitsimmons. Rhoda was puzzled how a criminal like Binay could be held in such high regard by her peers. To her cop's mind, he sounded like a suspect in two serious felonies— arson and murder. Her old friend, Ron Blackbird, filled her in.

“The old priest was molesting young boys for years. Complaints to the bishop went nowhere. If it was Binay who took care of the problem, then he did the reservation a big favor. Nobody wanted the old priest murdered, but then again, nobody can say for sure that he was murdered, either. All we know is that he's gone. For all anybody knows, he's lying on a beach in Florida.”

“Why burn down the old school?” Rhoda asked.

“The school was a disgrace,” chimed in Ted Moreaux, another of Rhoda's old classmates. “Infested with rats and roaches, leaky roof, no indoor plumbing, it stood as a symbol of everything that's wrong with life on the rez— poor, neglected, and getting worse. Again, if it was Binay who torched it, he did us all a favor.”

Rhoda said, “I thought the casino money was supposed to buy us a new school. There was even talk of a clinic and a supermarket.”

This got nods and chuckles all around. Finally, Ron said, “Those were some of the promises the casino owners made to get us to sign over the land so they could build the thing. The casino cost something like twenty million dollars. Where do you think

that money came from? The tribe had to sign away its soul to get it. Since then, nothing has worked out as promised. Old Twotrees and the tribal council are the only ones who have seen any improvement in their lifestyles. They all built nice homes in Ashland. There's a lot of anger here on the rez against the casino and the council, especially among us traditionals. To us, Binay's a hero. At least, he's doing something." By "traditionals," Rhoda understood he meant the fifteen hundred Chippewa who actually lived on the reservation.

"So why don't you just vote the council out of office?" asked Rhoda.

A fellow Rhoda didn't recognize, a second cousin perhaps, named Thomas Cloud, jumped into the discussion, "It's because of the way our population is distributed. There's only about 1,500 of us on the reservation; there are 4,500 living in Ashland and God knows where else. They all have votes, and they outnumber us three to one. What's more, they're happy about the casino deal."

Nora Nightsky joined in the discussion. Nora was a strong voice among the traditionals. She not only organized the powwow every year and published the town's once-in-a-while newsletter, *The Kingfisher*, but her son had joined the strictest traditional band on the reservation and had gone completely native. "You've been away a long time, Rhoda. You weren't here when the casino people came to town and promised us the moon. There are so many pigs feeding at this trough, there's nothing left for the people. Everyone has their hand out and Hightower greases every palm. And you know who the worst pigs are? Joe Twotrees and the tribal council. You must have seen the big brick monument the council built. That's two million dollars that could have been used for something the people needed. Instead, we have a fancy new office building."

"You know how a casino like ours gets built?" asked Nora. "The tribe signs away everything to some shady corporation. In our case, it's the Phoenix Corporation. They already own four or five Indian casinos in Wisconsin. The Phoenix Corporation hires high-profile lobbyists to make its case in Madison and Washington.

Lots of money buys lots of political support. It's a sick system, and it stinks."

Rhoda asked, "Who owns the Phoenix Corporation?"

"Who knows?" said Nora. "The board of directors looks clean as a whistle, but the biggest shareholders aren't known. From what I've read, there's a lot of mob influence behind Indian gaming. It's a scandal waiting to happen."

It didn't take a genius to pick up on the resentment and bad feelings brewing among the residents, and Rhoda sensed it clearly. It was the traditionals who worked the hardest to keep the flame of Chippewa culture alive. It was no wonder they considered Binay a hero; he was doing what they would all like to do.

Bill, who had been a silent presence during all this, asked Rhoda if he could have a private word with her. They moved off into the shadows, and he said, "I have a piece of information that I think you'll find interesting." He told her about picking up Arthur Levine and learning that the Phoenix Corporation planned to shut down the casino at the end of October. Rhoda was stunned.

"I'm glad you didn't say anything to the group. This news is a piece of dynamite. I have to think of what this means for the reservation and how we might use it to our advantage. The end of October. That doesn't give us much time to protect our interests."

When the eating was done, a fire was lit and stones were heated for the sweat lodge. A good sweat was a traditional Chippewa social function, and there were always takers. Most families had a sweat lodge in the backyard, and Rhoda's house was no exception. A good sweat purified the body, and when done in conjunction with fasting and herbs, it became a spiritual experience. But at the wiisini it was purely social and a chance to get naked and laugh. A steady stream of people, young and old, stripped down to their underwear and sat for a few minutes in the steamy warmth of the little lodge.

At sunset, some people started drifting homeward. The old folks and the babies headed for bed. Meanwhile, drums and rattles appeared as if from nowhere, and some traditional chanting and

dancing began. Rhoda's brothers, Charley and Mike, participated, as did a number of friends and children. Rhoda sat in the shadows with Bill and a group of cousins and old chums, watching and talking. Someone said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find a way to make the casino actually live up to its promises?"

"You mean like build a school or hire a doctor? It would take a miracle."

"You'd have to go and rob the place to get any money out of it."

"Maybe that's Binay's next plan, knock off the casino."

"And then burn the fucker down."

After a while, it was time for a story. To many, this was the best part of the evening. Storytelling was a rich part of Chippewa culture. By popular demand, Dancing Bear was encouraged to stand and tell a story from her vast storehouse of tales. These ancient stories and myths made up the Chippewa oral tradition. New stories were added, but most were hundreds of years old. Someone built up the fire to drive away the evening chill. The drums were put away, and the chanting stopped. Dancing Bear walked into the light, and in a voice that belied her frail body, she began.

"This is the story called "The Sleeping Giant." It goes like this:

"One day Nanna Bijou, the Great Spirit of the Deep Water, decided to reward a certain tribe of the Chippewa people because of their loyalty to their gods and their industrious and peaceful nature. The Great Spirit told the chief, Silver Fox, about a cave that led to the richest silver mine in the world. But he also warned Silver Fox that if any member of his tribe were ever to tell the white man about this mine, he, Nanna Bijou, would turn them all to stone.

"These Chippewa became famous silver workers. They fashioned the most beautiful silver ornaments and decorated their moccasins and headdresses with them. They even put silver on their baskets. It didn't take long before the white man learned of all this wealth and because he was greedy, wanted to learn the where-

abouts of the fabulous mine. The white man tried everything to learn the secret. They captured two of the tribe's warriors and did many painful things to them. Torture and death failed to make the gallant Chippewa divulge the secret. So, the white men summoned their most cunning scout, a half-breed Indian named Old One Eye, and ordered him to enter the Chippewa camp disguised as one of them. This was a dangerous and difficult mission, but Old One Eye was half Indian and knew the ways of the Chippewa people.

"After a little while, he was accepted by the tribe, and soon after that he learned the location of the mine. One night, he made his way to the mine and took several large pieces of silver and brought them to the trading post. Being half white, he was just as greedy as any of them and hoped to keep the secret to himself. The white men, intent upon finding the source of the silver, filled the scout with whisky and persuaded him to lead them to the mine. Just as they were in sight of the mine, a huge storm broke over the lake. The white men were drowned, and the scout was found drifting in his canoe, the bottom half of his body turned to stone.

"When the storm cleared, where once the bay had been wide open, there now was a great ring of boulders blocking its entrance. The Great Spirit's warning had come true, and the tribe had been turned to stone.

"Beyond the Bay of Stones, there can be found a shaft that leads to what was once the richest silver mine in the world. White men have repeatedly tried to pump out the water that floods in from the lake, but their efforts have been in vain. It is still under the curse of Nanna Bijou to this very day. The Chippewa's silver is still there, but no one can use it."

When Dancing Bear was finished, there was complete silence around the fire. The story frightened the children, yet somehow it seemed to speak to the current situation. After a few quiet minutes, a lively discussion ensued.

"It's obvious what the story means," said a voice from the shadows. "The wealth of the people should not be given away to

the white man. The wealth of our land, and the land itself, should never have been given over to the casino operators.”

“It’s because we broke faith with our gods that we were punished,” said another.

“I wouldn’t mind if the casino operators got turned to stone.” This got a big laugh until a female voice reminded the group, “But in the story it was the Chippewa who got turned to stone, not the white man, and it was an Indian who betrayed them.”

“A half-Indian,” someone corrected, “That’s why he was only half turned to stone.”

“I think the story is talking about the greed and corruption of the white man. That’s what the casino represents. The casino is the silver mine, and it has been stolen from us. Maybe some strong action by the people could unflood the mine and get the silver flowing again.”

“Maybe we should appeal to Nana Bijou.”

“Maybe Binay and his band will swoop in and run Hightower and his crooks off the reservation.”

This last comment led to a discussion about A.I.M. and its political objectives. The American Indian Movement was started in the late sixties by three Chippewa radicals as a way to protect Indian rights. After a few violent confrontations with federal authorities, most notably the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington and the shootings at Wounded Knee, the movement matured into a less confrontational organization. It was still active on a number of reservations and was still a champion of Indian rights, but its manifestation on the Bad River Reservation was a throwback to its violent beginnings.

“You don’t hear much about them these days,” said a voice around the fire.

“That’s only because they stopped shooting at the FBI. Has anyone noticed there’s a lot more federal law enforcement poking around town these days?”

“They’re looking for Binay and investigating the missing priest and the school fire. They asked me if I knew anything. I

didn't. I wouldn't tell those fuckers anything, even if I did."

Then, Nora Nightsky addressed the group, "The truth is that nothing will ever change on the reservation until the Indian people take charge of their lives. It would be a good thing if we could find a way to free ourselves from the parasites and use our silver as we see fit."

"Yes, that's the dream," said a voice from the group around the fire. Achieving it is the problem."

Rhoda said, "We need to form a committee and come up with a plan. If the casino won't share the wealth as they agreed, we need to figure out a way to make them live up to their agreements. And we need to act now."

This stirred up general murmurs of agreement by those present. A woman spoke. I hope you're not talking about harming the casino, are you? That will only land us all in jail."

A man said, "No, nothing quite so drastic, but I've heard about ways to gamble that can change the odds in your favor. A clever person can make a lot of money. Charley would know more about that. Charley, you here?"

Charley spoke up. "Lots of people try to improve their odds. Lots of people think they have a system. It's mostly nonsense. You can't beat the house."

"How about the slot machines, can you beat them?" asked a voice from the shadows. "The Silver Eagle jackpot is over ten million."

"I think it would be harder to rig a slot machine than to count cards," said Charley, "and the Silver Eagle is the toughest slot machine of them all. It's got layers of defense and it's computer controlled. It would be easier to rob a bank."

"Well that's it, then," said Rhoda. "Let's come up with a way to win the Silver Eagle jackpot and collect the ten million, and our problems are solved."

Nervous laughter sounded all around. But one man, Richard Bigboy, stood up and said, "I don't know about you, but I, for one, like a challenge. When I hear something can't be done, I try to



think of a way to do it. Now, I know it's a long shot, but if anyone wants to sit down and see if we can think of a way to make the casino pay us the money we were promised, I'm being serious here. Let's meet at my place tomorrow evening. If you're interested, come; if you're not, don't. Just don't blab about it. If Hightower gets wind of it, he'll turn us all to stone."

With this last thought in everyone's mind, the wiisini broke up for good. People said goodbye to Rhoda, gathered up their casserole dishes and sleeping children, and left. Rhoda and Bill made an effort to clean up, but it was late and both were tired from the long day. It was the first time they had a chance to be alone. Rhoda gave Bill a kiss and said in his ear, "Let's go to bed."

Unlike casinos near big cities, the Bad River casino closed its doors at midnight and reopened at eight in the morning. In the winter, it only opened on weekends. The crowd it attracted wasn't the type to stay up all night gambling. Its clientele consisted of blue-haired old ladies and retirees from surrounding towns. Busloads of church groups and seniors on outings made up the casino's basic trade. The twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul were the closest metropolitan areas, but they were a hundred miles away and there were casinos much closer to them. So, at twelve o'clock, the doors were shut, the last drink was served, the lights went out, and the last bus pulled away. Ashland and the casino slept. With the exception of a couple of bored security guards, nothing stirred until the doors opened at eight the next morning.

A couple of days after the wiisini, the usual knot of employees waited in the parking lot for Neal Arnold, the casino's head of security, to arrive and unlock the big glass front doors. That morning, he and the crowd of workers behind him were stopped in their tracks by what they found. The glass cases in the lobby were covered with spray painted messages. In large bold red letters were painted "These are ours" and on the glass covering the beautiful headdress, "Property of the Chippewa Nation."

Neal immediately hustled everyone outside except his secu-

rity staff. He re-locked the doors while the guards made a sweep of the building. All they found was a broken basement window, from which the vandal presumably escaped.

“He must have hidden himself somewhere when we locked up last night and then snuck out and did his work shortly before we opened,” Neal said. The paint is still tacky, so it should be easy to clean off. We’ll open a half hour late, is all. Get Ed and Ralph over here with rags and paint thinner, and let’s get this mess cleaned up.”

A few hours later, Neal Arnold explained the morning’s excitement to Hightower. Standing before Hightower’s big desk, Arnold felt like a school kid standing before the principal. Hightower was not happy.

“You think it was that goddamn Binay?” He asked the embarrassed security chief.

“We know it was. He left his little bird symbols on a couple of the cases. I already alerted the FBI about the break-in.”

“That wasn’t a good idea,” Hightower said, “The last thing this casino needs is more federal attention. What I want to know is what you’re going to do to prevent this from happening again.”

“I’m putting an extra guard on at night and making them walk a beat,” Arnold replied.

“That’s a good first step,” said Hightower jabbing the air for emphasis, “But I want you to fire those two guards who let this happen. Damn Indians were probably in cahoots with this Bird fellow. I want you to make an example out of them.”

Firing two local boys was probably not a good idea for long-term community relations, but Neal Arnold had been around too long to argue with the boss. He nodded his head and headed downstairs to fire the guards.

## CHAPTER 40

On entering the lobby of the Bad River Casino, the first thing a visitor sees is the showcases of Indian artwork. Just beyond the entrance lobby is the casino floor, and while the Indian bead work is spectacular, few visitors stop to admire it. What the customers are looking for can be found in the twenty thousand square feet of flashing lights, noise, and commotion that beckons the casual gambler. The first thing a visitor sees on the gaming floor is the Silver Eagle slot machine, a large gleaming slot decorated with eagles in flight, swooping and diving. Above the Eagle is an enormous, constantly changing digital sign, visible from anywhere in the casino, showing the current jackpot. This day it stood at \$9,877,643, big enough to make anyone drool. It cost five bucks to pull the big lever, and almost every visitor tried it at least once.

The Silver Eagle, like every modern slot machine, was a marvel of technology. A computer had replaced the wheels and gears of its primitive ancestors. In fact, it contained no moving parts at all. Instead, a computer program generated random numbers and a video screen simulated the spinning of wheels. The big lever on the side was just for show, this one-armed bandit would work just as well with the push of a button.

In the case of the Silver Eagle, the company's central computer controlled how often and how much the machine paid out. Unlike other slot machines on the casino floor at Bad River,

the Silver Eagle belonged to a family of slots known as progressive machines. Progressive machines are connected to each other, forming a network of similar machines. These networked machines do not need to be in the same casino, or even the same state. They are connected through high-speed fiber optic lines. Their jackpots are pooled and adjusted in proportion to their combined revenues. These machines are programmed to pay out at a much slower rate, and with much longer odds, than a regular slot machine. Playing a progressive slot is akin to playing the lottery.

Every state uses its own formula to set a slot machine's odds. Generally, a slot pays out between seventy-five and eighty-five percent of the money it collects. The various state gaming commissions check constantly to assure that the casino operators are complying with the guidelines. Severe penalties are handed out if the house is found taking more than its share. The house doesn't have to cheat on the odds, however. Twenty percent of the take turns out to be a whole lot of money.

On the Sunday evening following the wiisini, Ted Moreaux gave this technical explanation was given to seven traditionals gathered in Richard Bigboy's house. Ted was a stocky twenty-six-year-old who had somehow defied the odds and managed to get a college education. He had studied computer programming at Wisconsin State and was one of a handful of college-educated Indians on the reservation. He worked at the casino in the surveillance control room. He also lived on the reservation and believed strongly in the traditional Chippewa way of life.

This meeting was the result of Richard Bigboy's invitation, issued at the wiisini, to explore alternative methods of making the casino pay its fair share. Early on, the discussion zeroed in on noodling out a way to beat the casino's star attraction, the progressive slot machine called the Silver Eagle.

"Just hypothetically speaking," Mike asked Ted, "what would someone face who wanted to tamper with that particular machine?"

“Well,” said Ted, counting on his fingers. “There are several layers of security protecting the Silver Eagle. There are three PTZ (pan, tilt, zoom) cameras on it at all times, and they are constantly recording. All of the power cables and phone lines leading in and out of the machine are hidden, shielded, and wired to sound an alarm if tampered with. The machine’s access panel is locked, and the only key is in Hightower’s office. On top of that, a security guard walks by every few minutes to keep an eye on things. It might be easier to walk off with a roulette table than to try to monkey with the Silver Eagle.”

“Just speaking theoretically, Ted, what would someone have to do to make the Silver Eagle pay off on demand?” asked Rhoda.

“Well,” said Ted scratching his head, “I guess first you’d have to deal with the cameras and then distract the guards and open the back of the machine after somehow getting the key; then, you’d have to reprogram its computer, providing you had a copy of its program and its password. Finally, you’d have to be able to do this without leaving a trail and be able to pull it off in a few minutes. A pretty tall order.”

”It sounds impossible,” said Ron Blackbird.

“Nothing’s impossible. Difficult, sure, but if human beings built it, I suppose people can figure out a way to defeat it. Anybody here see Ocean’s Eleven?”

“Oh, come on,” said Charley, “That was the most ridiculous movie. It was pure Hollywood. And besides, those guys were supposed to be cool professionals. We’re nervous amateurs without a script. How do you expect us to pull off a complicated caper like that?”

“Right, all that’s true,” replied Ted, “but the point I’m trying to make is that if you’re clever enough and plan well enough, you can pull off anything. What we’re talking about here is much smaller and much more manageable than what those actors in the movie did. I’ve actually been thinking about this for some time, academically, of course. I thought of it as an interesting mental

exercise. I think that if we're smart and lucky we might figure out a way to pull this off."

"Wait, wait. Let's back up here a second," said Nora. "If we're serious about this, exploring the problem, I mean, we need to deal with the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room: the morality of what we're thinking of doing. Before we get down to planning anything in any detail, we have to come to terms with the fact that what we are talking about is illegal, criminal actually. Would anyone like to address the pesky question of right and wrong?"

Rhoda stood up and said she had something to add to the morality issue, "I don't know if many of you had a chance to meet my friend, Bill. Well, Bill's a cop in Oconee. Anyway, to make a long story short, Bill arrested a guy, an accountant, who works for the Phoenix Corporation. This guy knows all about their inner workings, and he told Bill that Phoenix was going to shut down our casino at the end of October."

This news landed in the discussion like a five-hundred-pound bomb. There were bursts of outrage, gasps, shouts of disbelief, and in a few cases, stunned silence. Rhoda continued, "So, not only has the casino been stealing our money, and the Phoenix Corporation stealing the casino's money, but it turns out that the millions of dollars they have stolen aren't even enough for them. They'd rather close down the entire operation, kill what little benefit the reservation actually gets from having that thing on our land, like jobs and tourism, and just pick up and walk away. If you can find a shred of morality in that, I'd like to hear it."

"You're absolutely sure that this information is accurate, Rhoda?" Richard asked.

"Bill's a good friend. I trust him completely; he'd never make something like this up."

"Well," said Richard. "Assuming this information is correct, and assuming we want to get our hands on the Silver Eagle jackpot, we'll have to act damn fast before there's no jackpot to win."

"I think this news solves the ethical dilemma. It almost jus-

tifies our actions.” said Nora. “That ten million is just about what the casino promised. It could do a lot of good. If the casino gave us the million or so a year we were promised, we wouldn’t even be having this discussion.”

Nora called for a vote: “Anyone’s conscience telling them not to get involved? How many are for seriously exploring winning the Silver Eagle jackpot, even if it means technically breaking the law?” Seven hands went up. It was at this instant that the band of rather ordinary individuals took an irrevocable step into the unknown. Suddenly, they were conspirators.

“I have to confess I get a little queasy thinking about getting caught,” Rhoda admitted.

“So let’s not get caught,” said Mike, “Let’s make a plan so perfect they make a Hollywood movie out of it.”

“This is going to require careful planning and organization,” said Rhoda.

“Fortunately, Nora’s here,” said Mike, “Why don’t you take charge, Nora, and organize us?”

This suggestion received general assent, and Nora Night-sky opened her legal pad to a clean sheet and said, “Okay, fellow conspirators, here’s how I see going about this thing. First I’m going to make a list of the obstacles we face, and then we will assign people to put their minds and talents to the task of overcoming every single one of them. So, umm, Ted, help me out here, see if I have this right:

“One. The cameras.

“Two. The guards.

“Three. The key.

“Four. The program and passwords.

“Five. Doing it fast and clean so it’s untraceable. Do I have this right?”

“I think that covers the main hurdles,” said Ted.

“See? It’s just a matter of organization and scheduling. Just like the powwow. Now, let’s do some brainstorming on the problems one at a time and see what we can come up with. First on the

list are the cameras. Any ideas?”

Ted smiled and said, “Let me tell you folks something about my job at the casino. I work up in the surveillance control room. That’s where all of the hundreds of cameras, screens, and recorders are housed. I’m the resident computer nerd and technology guy. If there are troubles with any of the computer systems or the camera and recorder systems, or the network, I’m who they call. If there’s trouble with the equipment, it’s up to me to get it fixed. So I’m in a good position to come up with a way to fool the cameras. I’m pretty confident I can take care of them. I’ll explain the details later.”

“Great, Ted, that takes care of number one. Number two on the list is the security guard. Any ideas on how that might work? Mike, that’s your field. What do you know about the security around the Silver Eagle?”

“Right.” Mike got to his feet. He wasn’t used to speaking in front of a group. He cleared his throat and said, “The guard circulates around the front entrance and swings by the Eagle every ten minutes on average. In case of trouble, the guard’s orders are to give the entrance priority. So we would need to create a distraction at the entrance that would occupy the guard for as long as we need. I’m not sure what the distraction might be, but I’m sure we can think of something.”

“Right, now we’re getting somewhere,” said Nora writing furiously in her notebook. “Three is the key that opens the back of the Eagle and gives us access to its computer. Ted said there’s only one key and it’s in Hightower’s office. Anybody have any ideas on how we could get that key?”

Mike spoke up again. “I have to go to Hightower’s office almost every day for one thing or another. I’m pretty friendly with Ricki Rice, his secretary. She’s nice, and I think she likes me. She’s a real good-looking girl but not especially bright. Maybe, if we could get Hightower out of his office, I could charm Ricki into giving me the key.”

“It’s an idea. You’ll have to come up with an effective



dodge to make that work. Let's think about it some more and discuss it again at the next meeting. Now comes the hard part. Number four, cracking the computer program and getting the passwords. Anybody have a clue on how we might accomplish either task?"

Rhoda raised her hand, "Anybody ever hear of an outfit called Little Wind?" Everyone shook their head no. "Little Wind is a Japanese hacker group. Very mysterious, very hard to reach, but they're considered the best in the business. And their business is hacking into programs. They're headquartered in Nogata, Japan. They have several branches around the world. I think there's a branch in Chicago. Anyway, these guys are legendary. They could hack their way into anything. The Pentagon hires them to test their computer security, for Pete's sakes. I don't think the Silver Eagle would present much of a challenge to them. The reason I know about them at all is that my old college roommate married one of them. At least, that's what she told me. I could give her a call and see if we could interest them in our caper."

"Wow! That's perfect," cried Ted. Animated now, he jumped to his feet and began pacing the room. "A couple of years ago, I was working with the programmers who installed the Silver Eagle. It was interesting work. I still have a copy of the discs they used. It's a commercially available program especially made for progressive slots. I'm sure my old copy has been updated several times since, but until we could get hold of the current version, we'd be halfway there. I could give Rhoda my old copy so her hacker friends could get started playing with it. I even have the old pass codes, but I know for a fact that they change those every few weeks. But, hey, passwords are what hackers are all about, right?"

"Now we're cooking," says Nora. "But how do we go about getting the newest version of the program?"

"We buy it," says Ted. "It's available to licensed casinos. We'll need to get hold of an official purchase order form, and then we could simply order a copy through the mail. Of course, we would have to intercept the mail before it got delivered to Hight-

ower's desk, but if we can't figure out how to do that, what hope do we have of pulling this off at all?"

"All right, gang, good progress. That brings us to the last item on our list: installing the modified program in a timely and untraceable manner. Any thoughts on that little bump in the road?"

Ted again: "With the rigged program on my laptop, a five-dollar fire-wire cable, and the key, I could be in and out of the Eagle in less than ten minutes. Whether it's traceable or not, I'm not so sure. I'm thinking if there was a power failure and all the slot machines had to reboot, then the system wouldn't know we were there."

"A power failure?" a half-dozen voices call out in varying degrees of dismay. "You never mentioned anything about a power failure before."

"I didn't think of it before. We don't need a major power failure, just enough for the power to blink off and on for a second. That will cause the Silver Eagle to reboot and cover our entry. Otherwise, the Eagle will have a record of us monkeying around."

"How on earth are we going to make the electrical system blink?" asked Charley Deerwalker, who hadn't said much until now.

"I don't know," said Ted, "Add it to the list, Nora. We'll have to work on it."

"I have an idea for that," said Nora "Let me give it some more thought, though. Next, we need to discuss the schedule. Anybody have an idea of when this should happen? Charley, you have an idea?"

"We have the biggest weekend of the year coming up in a few weeks. The crowds will be enormous, and the staff will be tired, overworked, and spread thin. That might be the best time to try something like this. On the down side, more people mean more eyes watching and more chance of things going wrong."

"Oh, I like that idea," said Rhoda. "The crowds could provide cover for our operation. Like Charley says, everyone will have their hands full. I think it's the best time."

“I agree; it’s a good idea.” said Nora. “Hightower called me just the other day and asked me to bring some dancers and drummers to the casino the weekend of the powwow. This could work out nicely. I think we’re making real progress.

“What we need to do now is assign people to specific tasks. Let’s see, Mike, you want to see if you could sweet-talk Ricki out of a purchase order and the key.

“Rhoda, you’re going to establish contact with your old roommate and try to get the hackers to help us.

“Ted, you’ve got to get your old copy of the program to Rhoda and test out your camera idea.

“Charley, you could help me work out the distraction.

“That leaves Richard to work on the power failure issue. What do you say, Richard?”

“Okay, I’m game, but I don’t know all that much about electricity and I don’t work at the casino.”

“You’ll do fine.” said Nora.

## CHAPTER 41

Rhoda, like the rest of the conspirators, got right on her assignment. She drove into Ashland, where she could get a high-speed Internet connection at a coffee shop. She ordered a latte and looked up her old roommate's phone number on an Internet phone search. While doing this, she thought of curly haired Evelyn Stone, with genuine fondness. They roomed together for three years, until Evelyn quit school at the end of their junior year to run off to Japan with Toshi Tanaka. Evelyn and Rhoda had been through a lot together in those formative years; they shared clothes, confidences, and more than one boyfriend. Rhoda was happy for her friend. Toshi was handsome, quiet, and kind, and quite obviously nuts about Evelyn.

Always a flighty person, Evelyn couldn't settle on a major and hopped from history to English to math before settling on computer science in her junior year. That's how she met Toshi. He was the school's computer genius, an exchange student from Japan on a full scholarship. Everyone expected he would be a millionaire before he was thirty.

Rhoda and Evelyn stayed in close communication during Rhoda's senior year. E-mails and phone calls flew back and forth. Evelyn and Toshi were living in Japan. Evelyn was lonesome but excited. She and Toshi were to be married, and Toshi found work with a mysterious group of professional hackers called Little Wind.

There was a wedding invitation, which Rhoda had to decline for lack of funds. After that, the messages wound down to a trickle. Now, except for an occasional e-mail, the two young women had pretty much lost touch. The last Rhoda heard had been an e-mail a few months earlier, letting Rhoda know that Evelyn was back in Chicago. There was no mention of Toshi, and Rhoda assumed they were no longer a couple.

A computer search for Evelyn Stone in Chicago generated nine hits. Looking up the old e-mail address, Rhoda found it matched one of the nine. She picked up the phone and dialed the number. A machine answered, and a voice Rhoda would recognize anywhere told her to leave a message. Rhoda did.

The following afternoon, there was a message from Evelyn on Rhoda's voice mail. Rhoda called back, and this time the real live Evelyn answered. There was an initial rush of excited catching up before Rhoda got down to business.

“So, tell me, Evelyn, are you still in touch with that hacker group you wrote me about?”

“Oh, that was Toshi's thing. It entirely absorbed his mind. It became an obsession with him. I believe it's the reason we finally split up. I couldn't get his attention. He could never explain what he was working on; everything was a big secret. It was no kind of life. Of course, it nearly killed him when I left. He still loves me, the poor slob. Every day, he calls apologizing and begging me to come back. It's sad, really. Anyway, why do you ask?”

“I need a good hacker. Was Toshi's group any good?”

“The best, world class. I'm not kidding, Rhoda. Entire governments would hire them to test their security. What on Earth do you need them for?”

“I can't tell you.”

“Right, I should have guessed. It's a secret.”

“I'm sorry, Evelyn, but it really is a secret. I do need your help, though. I would like to enlist Little Wind's services.”

“They're very picky about what jobs they take. You'll have

to write to Toshi, explaining what you want and why. They have their own code of ethics. They try to be socially conscious and won't do anything for personal gain, although I think they once hacked into the German Central Bank and gave themselves regular paychecks for life."

"So, how do I write to him?" asked Rhoda.

"I'll give you his anonymous e-mail address. It goes through a half-dozen blind mail servers before it reaches him. You can ask him yourself, and if you'd like, I'll write to him too and put in a good word for you."

"Thanks, Ev, you're the best."

Checking her e-mail a few hours later, Rhoda found two real messages among the spam. Evelyn had sent her Toshi's address and added a note wishing her luck. There was also an e-mail from Ted Moreaux. At first, Rhoda didn't understand what Ted was saying but then she realized he was being cryptic. This was smart. If things went wrong and there was an investigation, all communications between the conspirators could be used to make a case against them. Ted wrote: "I found your Frisbee. You can pick it up at my place later." He was really asking her to stop by his house and pick up the disc he made of the old Silver Eagle program.

Next, Rhoda opened a secure e-mail account and wrote to Toshi and the hackers, describing the plan her group had hatched to win the ten million dollar jackpot and like Robin Hood, to use the money for the good of the tribe. She wrote that they had all of the details figured out except how to manipulate the program to make it pay off on demand. This part wasn't completely true, but she figured Little Wind didn't need to know all of the daunting problems they still faced. Besides, it would make her plea for assistance more urgent.

She wrote Toshi about the terrible injustices the casino was perpetrating on her people, how the casino siphoned money from the reservation in order to line the pockets of crooked politicians. She played up the social injustice aspect, explaining how the Mafia

owners drove limos while her people lived in abject poverty. She pointed out that the tribe was promised casino revenue to use for schools and health care and to improve social services but how, in reality, they got almost nothing.

She threw in some statistics about infant mortality, obesity, alcoholism, and life expectancy among Native Americans. Then, to clinch her case, she promised that every cent gained by rigging the slot machine would be used for good. She concluded with the revelation that the Phoenix Corporation planned to close the casino in a few weeks, leaving even more hardship and suffering in its wake. She re-read the message, decided it said what needed to be said, and pushed the send button.

The casino sat on the Indian side of the border that divides the reservation from the city of Ashland. It was an easy walk from the coffee shop to the casino, so while Rhoda waited for an answer from Toshi and Little Wind, she walked over to the casino to kill time. She sat outside the hotel part of the building and looked over the gardens. There were still a few late flowers. She thought about Bill and how she'd like to tell him about this latest caper, but then she thought better of it. No sense involving him in what amounted to a criminal enterprise. Maybe she'd tell him someday—when they were old. Now there was a new thought, growing old with Bill.

Nothing came from Toshi that afternoon. Rhoda went home and helped Dancing Bear prepare dinner for her brothers. Since she had returned to the reservation, the family had been getting together frequently. Rhoda helped Dancing Bear set the table and prepare the meal of venison stew. As they worked, Dancing Bear said, "You seem troubled, child. Where are your thoughts?"

Rhoda ached to tell her grandmother about the desperate plan she and her friends had hatched, but she did not want to burden her with such a secret or, if the whole enterprise went sour, implicate her in the conspiracy. Instead, Rhoda asked her, "Tell me Grandmother, do you think it is right to do a bad thing if the result

is a good thing?”

The old woman did not answer for a long time but continued chopping vegetables and slicing the bloody deer meat into cubes. When the stew was assembled and simmering on the old stove, she said, “There are many kinds of right and wrong, my child. There are the laws made by men, which we do our best to obey, and there are the laws of the heart, which we must obey. I think you know one from the other.”

Mike Deerwalker’s first assignment was to obtain a blank purchase order form so the committee, he thought of them as “the Renegades,” could buy a current copy of the program the Silver Eagle was running. The program was called BallySoft 4.0, and it was touted as the most secure progressive slot machine program ever made. It wasn’t cheap, and they all had to pitch in a hundred bucks apiece in order to pay for it.

Copies of blank purchase orders were kept in Hightower’s office and were under the careful eye of Ricki Rice. Mike, like every other man with a pulse, had ogled and drooled over Ricki Rice for years. Over time, he had developed a flirtatious relationship with her, in which he asked her out and she sweetly declined. It was widely known that she was Hightower’s private squeeze. Still, he relished any pretext to go to the casino manager’s office and flirt with her. As a lowly security guard, he didn’t get to choose when to go, but every now and then, Dominick Albani, Mike’s asshole of a boss, made him run upstairs to the office just to jerk Mike’s chain.

Albani had recently been hired to fill the floor manager’s job even though, by rights, it should have gone to Mike. Mike had been there from the beginning and was practically promised the position by Neal Arnold, the head of security. But politics intervened, and Mike got screwed. As a result, there was no small amount of bad feeling between the two men, and Albani only made a bad situation worse by sending Mike on stupid errands, just because he could. This was how Albani asserted his authority. Mike supposed Albani was acting like the schoolyard bully he probably



had been. Mike hated him, but he really didn't mind the extra trips to Hightower's office. He enjoyed flirting with Ricki.

On this, the first workday after the renegades met, Dominick ordered Mike to run upstairs and fetch his sunglasses. That was the word he used: "fetch." He actually said, "Hey, Mike. How ya doin'?' Wouldja do me a favor 'n fetch my sunglasses? I musta left 'em upstairs."

"The stupid prick can't even speak English." Muttering something about Albani's ancestry under his breath, Mike climbed the steps two at a time to Hightower's office. He should have been floor manager. His record was exemplary. Instead, Hightower gave the job to a Mafia boss's son, a New Jersey goombah with the brain of a fruit fly. Politics. What are you gonna do, fight the Mafia?

Ricki was at her desk, pecking at a computer keyboard, probably surfing or shopping. She looked up and smiled when Mike walked in. She said, "Hiya Mike. What can I do you for?"

"Dom left his sunglasses here. Probably on purpose. Is that them?" She handed them to him, and he said, "Thanks Rick. Oh, I'm also supposed to pick up a purchase order form. Dom needs it to order new jackets for the guards."

"Geez Mike," Ricki said cracking her gum, "All requisition requests have to be approved by Mr. Hightower. You know that's the procedure."

"Yeah, I know, but Dom says Hightower ordered him to get these new jackets. He wants the security staff looking sharp for the powwow. And if Hightower ordered it, I guess he approved it."

"Well, I guess, if you put it like that." Ricki got up and walked to a cabinet, unlocked it, and handed Mike a blank purchase order form. Mike folded it in thirds and put it in his breast pocket.

"Say, Ricki, how about you and me having a drink after work?" Mike asked. "I'll buy you a margarita you can take a bath in."

"Ah, you're sweet, Mike. I'd really love to, but I already have a previous engagement. But ask me again sometime. Maybe

tomorrow, okay? But right now, I gotta shop for the boss.” Then, in a stage whisper, she added, “It’s his wife’s birthday.”

Mike said his goodbyes and left. He had the purchase order form in his pocket. The first small step in the scam had gone smoothly; the caper was launched. If Mike stopped to pondered how such a small action could have such big consequences, he showed no sign of it. He simply tapped the folded paper and walked off down the hall, feeling like a successful con man. But aware or unaware Mike had dislodged the first pebble on the rocky slope. Soon an avalanche of events would bury them all.

## CHAPTER 42

On a typical day, the Bad River Lodge and Casino hosted about fifty busloads of visitors. Most come to gamble away a few dollars, some, for a day out with friends or simply for something to do. The buses arriving at different times throughout the day delivered a cross section of the local population—retirees, senior citizens, farmers, and working people and the members of scores of social groups like bridge clubs, book clubs, and even quilting societies. Eventually, all planned a trip to the casino for a day of fun. The crowd was primarily drawn from the many small towns and cities in a hundred-mile radius.

On the Tuesday after the initial meeting of the conspirators, as buses pulled up to the casino, groups of gray-haired ladies and men, many with canes and walkers, struggled off and shuffled into the casino to play the slots. The young and the old, the lame and the halt, arrived in a steady stream. All made their way past the glass cases in the lobby into the casino proper. Many queued up to try their luck at the Silver Eagle before finding their way to the cashier for a large paper cup and a couple of rolls of quarters. Mike noticed a few wheelchair-bound customers among the new arrivals. There was nothing unusual about that; the Bad River Casino was handicap accessible and proud of it. A couple of the new electric wheelchairs trundled up the ramp and through the automatic doors.

The casino swallowed up the busloads of tourists like a

hungry animal. It was designed to swallow up their money, too, and dispense cheap thrills, and it performed its job very well. Some visitors would go home winners and most would spend their money on dreams, but everyone would have had a day of excitement and a few stories to tell their friends. What more could anyone want or expect from a day spent gambling?

An important part of Mike's job as a security guard was to keep an eye out for scammers. There is a lot of cash floating around a casino, and a lot of smart people have spent great effort devising ways to divert some of that cash into their own pockets. There are hundreds of ways to cheat the house and improve your odds. Some are harmless, like believing you have discovered a foolproof system at roulette after you play your system and win. There's no harm done. The house knows that no such systems really exist but hundreds are devised each year. Everybody wins occasionally, but nothing influences the rules of chance. Anything that does influence the pure randomness of a shuffled deck or a pair of dice is either illegal or forbidden: methods like counting cards or getting signals from the dealer or having your buddy the cashier pay you too much for your chips. These are all common scams and exactly the sort of stuff the cameras and the guards are watching for.

Some scam artists are little more than petty thieves preying on other gamblers. They watch for unguarded purses, carelessly pocketed wallets, or unwatched stacks of chips in front of a drunken winner. There are a million hustles and cons that feed off the vulnerable. Mike and the rest of the security staff had been trained to watch for this sort of activity.

In the morning security briefing, before the casino opened for the day, Dominick Albani passed the word to keep an eye out for a slot machine scam that had taken several neighboring casinos to the cleaners. "No one knows how they're doing it, and there are no descriptions of what they look like," he said.

"So what the hell are we looking for?" asked Bob Lemieux, a guard with a sense of humor.

“How the hell should I know? Just keep your eyes open. You see anything suspicious, call it in, okay?” Albani gestured with his hands, shrugged a neckless shrug, and walked away.

Mike thought the chances of catching these scammers were pretty slim, though it would be educational to watch some professionals at work. The irony of his position was not lost on him. Here he was, conspiring to rip off his employer for ten million dollars, just the kind of thing he was hired to prevent. Mike tried not to think about the hypocrisy of the situation; instead, he focused on his small part in the caper and all the good that would result from its success. His part was to locate the key to the Silver Eagle and figure out a way to borrow it for a few hours.

Once inside the big front doors, most of the visitors headed directly for the slots. Slot machines were Bad River’s bread and butter and represented the kind of gambling its customers understood. The odds might be better at blackjack or craps, but it’s hard to beat the rush you get from hitting a jackpot on a slot machine. Even a small payout is exciting—coins clatter into the payout trough, lights flash, and buzzers buzz. Whatever the amount—nickels, quarters, dollars—there’s nothing like it. You can win a fortune with the turn of a card at the poker table, but it’s a quiet, personal affair. On a slot machine, it’s a noisy, flashing public spectacle.

For some people, gambling’s a disease, but for most, it’s just a way to have some fun and test your luck. People generally adopt a single machine and wait patiently for it to pay off, methodically feeding in coin after coin until its internal mechanism tells it it’s time to pay out. Some slots are thought to pay out more often than others. These machines are highly prized and generate the most profit. The house does nothing to discourage this belief. It knows that the odds on all machines are exactly the same.

Everywhere Mike looked, there were people sitting intently in front of their machines. They were almost always alone, but every now and then, a group of friends would gather around a ma-

chine or play a few in a companionly row. This morning, a group of six gray-haired old ladies was clustered around three machines at the end of a row in Mike's sector. Six blue-haired old ladies with walkers and wheelchairs were clogging the aisle. Every once in a while, they did the old lady equivalent of jumping up and down with excitement. A tittering sound came from the group, and then there was the odd noise of arthritic hands clapping.

Mike walked up and down the rows. Albani had assigned him six rows of slots. He saw nothing suspicious. The group of old ladies cheered as one of their machines paid off. They were clogging the aisle so that he could not pass through, but he decided not to hassle them. They were probably all grandmothers out for a day of high excitement.

In another row, a middle-aged man was playing every pay line on a six-way machine. Every spin of the wheel gave him six chances to win and cost him a dollar and a half in quarters. He was pushing the buttons and pulling the lever as fast as he could. He seemed in a hurry to give the house his fifty or hundred bucks. Quarters fell into his tray from his many payouts, but he didn't seem interested. Mike thought he was a little strange, but he wasn't doing anything suspicious and he wasn't hitting any big jackpots.

Elsewhere in the row, a jackpot light went off atop a machine, and a fat black woman in a tight blue sweat suit leaped to her feet, screamed wildly, and did an impromptu victory dance. Her great bulk undulating up and down in time with the pulsating jackpot alarm. A flood of quarters spilled into her tray, and as she gathered them up by the handful, she praised the Lord over and over.

The next aisle over, the group of six grandmothers let out another titter of excitement, and Mike heard the unmistakable sound of coins splashing into the tray. The next time through, Mike asked one of the group where they were from. "We're the Lutheran Ladies Quilting Society and Bridge Club from Brighton," said the nearest grandmother with a Polident smile. "We come here every year to play the slots. I think we're doing just fine today."

And indeed, they were doing fine. Mike could see three heavy buckets filled with coins sitting on a wheeled walker seat. He looked on in disbelief as the coins kept coming and the ladies began filling a fourth bucket. He walked away, thinking about what he had just seen. A tangle of wheelchairs and walkers, three machines in use, but only the middle machine seemed to be paying.

When he came by again, the group had moved over one machine to the right. This time, Mike noticed that the lady at the middle machine had her walker facing backwards. One of the walker's handle grips was practically poking into the machine's payout tray. Then a light bulb went off in Mike's head, and he understood what was going on. He almost laughed out loud when he realized the scam.

Doing his job, Mike spoke into his walkie-talkie, "Thirteen here, I need the floor boss on aisle nine." A few seconds later Dominick Albani sauntered over.

"What's the trouble, Mike?" Albani asked. Mike pulled him out of hearing and said, "I think I found our slot machine scammers. See that group of six old ladies at the end of the row?"

"Yeah, I see 'em. What about 'em?"

"I believe they're jamming the slot with a device hidden in a walker. It's your call how you want to handle this."

"Whadda ya mean, handle it? If you're sure, let's bust 'em," Albani said.

"Well, yeah, that's one way of doing it. But if we make a big public display of busting a bunch of old ladies in wheelchairs and walkers, it's not going to make the casino look too good, even if they are pulling the scam. And if I'm wrong, we'll look even worse."

"Hmmm," grunted Albani in an attempt to look as if he was dealing with the complexities of the situation. "I'm gonna call the chief. Let him decide."

A few minutes later, Neal Arnold, head of security, arrived. Albani told him what was up. He ignored Albani and spoke directly to Mike, "You spotted this?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Where do you think they have the wire?”

“I believe they have something going up the payout tray from the handlebar of that backward walker. Some version of the old monkey’s paw tool they used to use to jam the old mechanicals with.”

“Well, there’s only one way to know for sure. I’ll approach the group quietly and see what’s what.”

Neal Arnold knew a delicate situation when he saw one. His years as a cop had honed his instincts for self-preservation. And while this situation certainly wasn’t life threatening, he knew that a public relations disaster could kill his career. He went over to the group and identified himself as head of security. He asked the ladies if they would mind if he inspected the machine in the middle. The ladies protested, but Arnold politely insisted. He gently pulled the backward walker away from the machine and a long stiff cable with a light on the end followed.

“Would you ladies mind coming with me? I need to speak with you privately.” To Albani and Mike he gestured to the four large buckets of coins the ladies had accumulated. “We’ll make sure your money is safe.”

Arnold walked the six women into the restaurant and sat them at a large round table. The ladies were silent and sheepish, knowing they had been caught stealing and were potentially in big trouble.

“Well, aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?” was how Arnold opened the conversation. “What kind of an example do you think you’re setting for your children? Shame on all of you. Why would six respectable grandmothers do something so obviously illegal?”

After a pouting silence, a small old lady voice mumbled something inaudible.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch what you said.”

“I said donut hole,” said one of the ladies, who looked about eighty years old.

“I don’t understand; did you say ‘donut hole?’”



The old lady explained, “Do you have any idea, young man, how much money prescription drugs cost? Medicare only pays for them so far, and then you enter the donut hole. There’s no coverage in the hole. You have to pay the full amount yourself. Those drug companies have sucked up all our savings and our Social Security. We had to do something to make extra money. La Verne here is on dialysis and Beatrice has skin cancer. Do you want me to go on?”

Neal Arnold would have laughed out loud if he wasn’t trying to be the tough cop. Instead he forced himself to look unmoved and told the ladies that their faces were now known to the casino and they were banished from the premises forever, which, judging by the average age and medical condition of the gang’s members, wouldn’t be too much longer.

After the tongue lashing by Arnold, the women were sent home without their ill-gotten gains.

“It’s called a monkey’s paw,” Mike explained to Hightower. Arnold and Albani stood on either side of him. They were up in Hightower’s office a couple of hours after the ladies were sent home. “In the old days, it was a specially shaped iron bar a scammer could work up into a slot machine’s innards to trip a payout switch. What the ladies were using was a modern version of that old device. The light on the end of the cable blinded the electric eye counter inside the machine so it couldn’t count out the four, six, or ten coins it was supposed to pay. Instead, the electric counter would lose count and pay much more than it should. Eventually, the machine was emptied, and the ladies moved down the row to drain the next one. They had already accumulated twelve hundred dollars from two machines when they were caught.”

“And the day was still young,” Hightower said. “You ever hear of this monkey thing, Neal?”

“I was around in the days of mechanical slots,” said Arnold. “I thought I’d seen the last of them. In those days, a pro could drain a slot in less than a minute. They beat us out of a fortune be-

fore we got wise. That was a good piece of work, son. Well done.” Arnold shook Mike’s hand. Turning to his floor manager, Arnold said, “Dominick, give this boy a raise, and then I want you to write up a memo we can circulate to the other casinos to alert them to this scam. I wonder how those old biddies figured this out?”

“I’d lay odds one of those old ladies has a computer-savvy grandson with a criminal mind,” said Hightower. “Pretty neat trick, though. Good work, men. You saved the casino a ton of money and handled the whole thing without embarrassment. I’ll arrange for a bonus for each of you.”

When Mike and Albani were heading back to work Albani said, “Nice going, you ass-kissing son of a bitch. You made me look bad in there. How’d you know about that paw thing, anyhow?”

“I learned how to read,” Mike responded and walked back to his section smiling.

A couple of days later, Albani sent Mike up to Hightower’s office to pick up his bonus check. He got a pat on the back, a well done, and a check for three hundred bucks for his trouble. Mike learned through the grapevine that Albani and Arnold only got checks for one fifty. On the way out, Ricki called Mike her hero and batted her eyes at him. He asked her to run off with him, but she said she had a doctor’s appointment.

When Mike reported back, Albani assigned him to accompany Ed Nightsky, Nora’s husband and the casino’s head custodian, to hump a row of heavy slots off the floor and down to maintenance. It was a shit detail and should have been assigned to someone with a lot less seniority than Mike. Albani handed Mike the key to the maintenance room. Regulations required that the key was to be in a guard’s possession at all times and the slot machines in transit were always to be accompanied by a security guard. These regulations were meant to prevent any unauthorized tampering with the slot machines. The regulations made good sense, and the casino management complied.

Ed Nightsky and his nephew, Ralph, muscled the heavy slots off their stands and on to a hand truck. Then, Ed, Ralph, and Mike wheeled the machines to the elevator and down to the casino basement.

The basement was a busy place. It held the vaults and counting rooms where the money was prepared for deposit. Twice a week, an armored car backed up to a loading dock, picked up the casino's receipts, and took them to a bank in town. Also down in the basement was the slot machine maintenance room, storage rooms, and like any basement, the utility room that housed the electrical and heating and cooling equipment. It was Ed's domain, and he led the way to the storage room. Mike followed behind, swinging the key.

Mike unlocked the slot machine maintenance room and watched as Ed and Ralph put the old machine on a stand for cleaning and inspection. Then, they picked up a newly cleaned and inspected machine and wheeled it back upstairs. Every slot was cleaned and inspected by state inspectors twice a year.

After several trips lugging slot machines back and forth, Mike made sure the storeroom was locked. Albani told him to bring the key back upstairs. Ricki was at her desk, e-mailing her girlfriends. Mike tossed the storeroom keys on her desk. She turned and put her finger to her lips to keep him from speaking loudly.

Mike whispered, "Here is the maintenance room key. Why are we whispering?"

Ricki pointed to the closed door to Hightower's office and whispered back, "Big meeting going on," Looking down at her calendar, she whispered, "A Mr. Tony Esposito, one of the big shot owners from back East and a Mr. Kay, a lobbyist."

"I think you mean lobbyist," said Mike.

From the muffled sounds of yelling coming from inside, it didn't sound like the meeting was going very well. After a minute, a stocky, dark-haired man with a cigar clenched in his teeth and a coat over his arm stomped out. He was followed by a smartly

dressed tall man wearing a fedora. Without a look at either Mike or Ricki, the men marched out.

“Let me guess,” Mike said. “The short guy who looks like the godfather is Esposito and mister high style is the lobbyist.”

“Gee, you’re a pretty smart guy, Mike.”

“That’s what I keep telling you.”

A half-minute later, a rumpled and rattled looking Dwight Hightower emerged. He looked at Ricki and said, “I’ll be down in the bar having a drink if anyone wants me, but I’d prefer not to be disturbed.” Seeing Mike standing there, he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I was just returning the maintenance room key, Mr. Hightower.”

“Fine,” Hightower said, in his mind already having his much-needed drink, “just leave them with Ricki.” With that, he was out the door and gone.

Mike lingered behind, chatting up Ricki while watching how she handled the keys. Ricki picked up the maintenance room key and took it into Hightower’s office. She walked over to the casino manager’s desk and took a second key from his middle drawer. She used that key to open a small wooden cabinet on the wall. Inside this cabinet were several rows of neatly labeled hooks with keys dangling from them. Ricki hung the maintenance room key on a hook labeled maintenance. She was about to shut the door when Mike whistled. “Man that’s a lot of keys.”

“I once counted them,” Ricki said. “There are 126 of them.”

Before she could shut and lock the cabinet, Mike had a few seconds to look at the rows of keys. There were keys to every door and lock in the casino. After a few seconds, Mike saw a key labeled Silver Eagle. It was a funny-shaped cylindrical affair, not the kind of key you could bring to the local hardware store and ask the clerk to make you a couple of duplicates. Ricki locked the cabinet and put its key back in Hightower’s desk. “You know you shouldn’t be in here,” Ricki said.

“Someday, I’ll have an office like this,” said Mike. “Maybe then you’ll go out with me.”

Mike now knew where the Silver Eagle’s key was kept and what it looked like. All he had to do now was figure out how to borrow it for an hour or two and then put it back. On the way down the stairs, he got an idea.

When he reported back to Albani on the casino floor, he told him, “You know, Dom, I’d sure appreciate it if you’d give that kind of shit work to someone else.”

“Oh da hero’s too good for the maintenance job.” Albani said in a mocking tone, “Dat’s just so sad.”

He’d been calling Mike “da hero” ever since Mike busted the old ladies and got the bigger bonus. Jealousy had done nothing to improve their relationship. “I’ll tell you what, hero, next time we have to move some slots around, which is like every day, guess whose goin’ wit ‘em?” Albani chuckled to himself. “Now get back to your sector until I call ya.”

The next day and every day thereafter, right after lunch, Mike’s earpiece would crackle with Albani’s unmistakable voice. “Mike, go to the office and get the maintenance room key and help Ed Nightsky on aisle twelve.”

Mike would throw Albani a dirty look, climb the steps to the office, and ask Ricki for the key. After a few days of this, Ricki’s natural laziness took over, and if Hightower was out, she would tell Mike to go and get the key himself. This was exactly what Mike was hoping would happen. When told to get the key, Mike would go to Hightower’s desk, get the key to the cabinet, and take the maintenance room key from its hook. If Hightower was in, Ricki got the keys. Hightower was out about half the time. Ricki was almost always either doing her nails or talking on the phone, so she just pointed to the office if she wanted Mike to get the key or held up her hand like a traffic cop if she didn’t.

Once this routine was established, Mike was confident he could snag the Silver Eagle key whenever he needed to. He only hoped that Hightower was out of his office on the big day.

## CHAPTER 43

Nora Nightsky had been organizing the Bad River Harvest Festival and powwow for twenty-five years. Back when Nora was a young girl, the festival was a local affair done for the enjoyment of the community. In those days, the rice harvest was a community effort. Everything was done by hand: harvesting, winnowing, drying, and packaging. Every step was labor intensive, and everyone participated. When it was over, the tribe was ready to party.

Since the completion of the casino, the harvest party had grown considerably larger and more commercial as the tribe found it could sell wild rice and trinkets to the growing number of tourists who came to watch “real Indians” celebrate. And while the party aspect of the festival had grown, the significance of the rice harvest itself had shrunk. Wild rice was once the tribe’s largest source of revenue; but now the casino with its good paying jobs and revenue sharing, pitiful as it was, replaced wild rice in the top spot.

Nora received no compensation for her efforts. She was one of those individuals who loved what she did. She put her energy into preserving her people’s history and culture. For many years, she had been collecting the odd bits and pieces of the tribe’s existence; she was a one-woman historical society. Nora was the

person the tribe went to for its genealogies, press clippings, and photo archives. Her good sense of organization kept this disparate collection accessible and available. Four large filing cabinets in an old bedroom comprised the heart of the collection. Her house also contained an extensive library of Chippewa ethnography

The lion's share of Nora's press clippings dated from around 1996, the year the casino was being seriously considered for approval by the state gaming authorities. Before the casino's completion in 2000, it seemed like every day there were articles in the Ashland daily. Before casino construction began, the tribe had hardly been mentioned. Then, Joe Twotrees and the council began meeting with state politicians, lobbyists, and moneylenders on a regular basis. It was a time of great hope and even greater expectations. Nora took the side of the anti-casino Indians who saw the casino as a threat to traditional values and the cause of losing control of their ancient land. She was suspicious of the casino ownership and did her best to investigate the mysterious Phoenix Corporation. She could find nothing incriminating and so could do little but complain. It was like trying to stop an avalanche.

Lately, Nora's little newsletter, *The Kingfisher*, had been printing articles on the American Indian Movement, and she ran a series of stories about Chippewa oral history. She proved to be so knowledgeable that several statewide news organizations had begun to use her as a source for stories involving Chippewa culture. She was the person the reporters went to when they needed the straight skinny on Binay and his activities. Binay was suspected of torching the old church school and causing Father Fitsimmons to disappear. This was statewide news for a while, and Nora was happy to pick up some extra income as a stringer.

After so many years of organizing the powwow, it was no longer much of a challenge for her. The only change she noticed over the years was the constantly decreasing pool of traditional dancing and drumming groups. Those young people interested in the old ways were a diminishing resource. But with the help of some neighboring tribes, there were still enough dancers and drum-

mers for the three days of the festival.

Her people loved to dance and sing. They always had. Powwows and festivals ran deep in Chippewa culture and easily predated Columbus. There were often impromptu dances around a fire somewhere in Odanah. There was dancing at weddings, births, rites of passage, funerals, and often, for no good reason. As poor as her people were, they knew how to celebrate life.

Having to schedule entertainment for the casino proved to be both a burden and an opportunity. She had assigned herself the job of engineering the distraction that would provide cover for the Silver Eagle operation.

Nora had explained the Silver Eagle idea to her husband, Ed, and he pledged his cooperation. Although his nephew Ralph assisted him in his custodian duties at the casino, the couple felt that he didn't need to be told anything. If it turned out that they needed his cooperation, they would ask, but for now, the fewer people who knew about what was cooking, the safer it would be for everyone.

Ed and Nora raised two sons. Barry Nightsky, the elder of the two, worked as a purchasing agent for an office equipment manufacturer in Lansing, Michigan. He was completely assimilated into white society. Ed and Nora saw him and his family once or twice a year. The younger son, Kevin Nightsky, took a much different path through life. At eighteen, he changed his name to D'nashta, or Hawk in the native tongue, and went to live on a remote part of the reservation with a group of hard-core traditionalists. He was part of a band of about thirty like-minded people living on Madeline Island, a couple of miles out into the lake. The band's leader, Yellow Moon, believed that a return to the old ways would save the tribe's soul. He and his band chose to live much as their ancestors had.

D'nashta and the Madeline Island band hunted, fished, and gathered their food as if the modern world didn't exist. They believed that the Great Spirit had provided everything the Chippewa needed to live and thrive. They sewed their clothing from deer hide



and gathered rice and maple syrup in the traditional way. They built their canoes from saplings covered in birch bark, sewn together with deer sinew, and sealed with pine tar. They trapped beaver and traded the pelts for iron tools and ammunition, just as their great-great-grandfathers had with the French on that very spot.

Madeline Island held a special place in Chippewa history. Nora and Ed relished every visit and frequently took the opportunity of Ed's day off to borrow a tribal canoe to pay their son a visit. On this beautiful morning, the last day of August, Ed and Nora poled through the marsh grass that lined the reservation's shore. There was still some rice to harvest, and on their way out, Nora and Ed performed the ancient ritual of bending the grass into the canoe with one stick and striking the seed tops with the other. Wild rice collected on the bottom of the canoe.

Beyond the reeds was a mile of open water to Madeline Island. It was early morning when they arrived, and the village was quiet. Nora gathered up the rice from the bottom of the canoe and wrapped it in a cloth. They left the rice with Yellow Moon's wife. It was customary to bring the head man something, and with the exception of tobacco, there was little more welcome than wild rice. To the Chippewa, the spirits had given them this land by the great lake with the promise of "the food that grows on water."

They walked to their son's wigwam and slapped on its birch covering to announce their arrival. Kevin/D'nashta came out and embraced his mother and father. He welcomed them inside. The wigwam was an effective shelter made from a frame of bent saplings covered with birch bark. Inside, it was dark and warm and smelled of herbs, grease, smoke, and human being. It was an earthy smell and not unpleasant. When they were seated, D'nashta passed around a pipe and all partook in a ritual smoke. That courtesy done, they talked first about their health, news of friends and relatives, and only then, about the business at hand.

Nora said, "I have a favor to ask of your village. Perhaps we should ask Yellow Moon to join us."

D'nashta agreed and went to get the headman. He returned

with a lean man of medium height and indeterminate age. Yellow Moon wore his graying hair long. The only thing that indicated his rank was the extra eagle feather in his headband. He greeted Ed and Nora and accepted the pipe D'nashta passed to him. That formality observed, once again they talked of things in their proper order until at last Nora was free to bring up her idea.

Nora began by asking Yellow Moon if the villagers still did much drumming and dancing.

Yellow Moon nodded and said, "We dance often. Our drummers are the best on the reservation. If we wished to compete, we would win."

Nora asked, "Would you ever consider dancing for the white man?"

"I would not want to dance for the amusement of those who would mock us."

"This is how it should be and what I thought you would say," said Nora. "But let me ask you in another way. Would you dance to give your people justice?"

"I would dance for that," Yellow Moon agreed.

"Then let me tell you of a plan we have to make lives better for those of us who live on the reservation. We have thought of a way to make the casino pay for the things it promised but has not delivered. A health clinic so our babies could be born healthy and without the mother dying. A school to educate our children in both the white man's learning and the rich culture of our people. A marketplace to sell our rice and handicrafts to tourists. A processing plant to dry and package the rice ourselves. This will give our people jobs, and the income will be distributed fairly. Would you dance for those things?"

"I would dance for them."

Nora went on to tell Yellow Moon about the plan to win the great jackpot at the casino. She told him how she needed to distract the security people and how Yellow Moon's dancers could be used for this purpose. Yellow Moon listened in silence, finally saying, "I will think on it; I will fast and sweat and see what the spirits

advise.”

Nora and Ed had to be satisfied with this. They thanked Yellow Moon and kissed their son goodbye. They retrieved their canoe and made the trip back to the mainland. It was a good visit. It would be interesting to learn what the spirits thought of their venture.

As Madeline Island receded behind them, Nora and Ed spoke of its place in Chippewa history. It was on Madeline Island that the treaty of La Pointe was signed in 1852. This treaty set up what has become the modern Indian reservation system. The treaty was a result of the Sandy Lake Tragedy, one of the more shameful chapters in the American government’s relationship with its native people.

In 1850, the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided to apply the Indian Removal Act to the Great Lake Chippewa. A few years earlier, Congress, in its wisdom, thought it would be a good idea to settle all the Eastern tribes west of the Mississippi on lands set aside for them there. This shortsighted policy ignored the thousands of years of cultural adaptation these tribes had made with the land. Some tribes developed a culture of hunting bison; some, like the forest dwelling Chippewa, were gatherers. The land shaped the people; geography was life. Blindly ignorant to any cultural dislocation, the government pursued its selfish policy for administrative purposes.

In an effort to get the Eastern Chippewa to move, the Bureau of Indian Affairs informed the tribes that their promised allotment of food, blankets, medicines, and money would now only be distributed at Sandy Lake, Minnesota, some five hundred miles away. This was done despite the fact that it was in gross violation of the government’s own treaty made just twenty years before. It was already late October when more than 3,000 Chippewa packed what little they had and made the long trek to Sandy Lake.

When they finally arrived, the weather was already freezing. The exhausted Indians found nothing there and were told to

wait. They waited for a month; many died of exposure, disease, and hunger while they were waiting. When the food allotment finally arrived, the Chippewa did not remain at Sandy Lake as the government had expected. The Chippewa did not want to give up their land. The tribe began the long trek home. By then, it was late December and bitter cold. More than four hundred people died along the way—more than ten percent never made it back. When news of this great injustice reached the American people, they were, to their great credit, ashamed and outraged at their public officials who engineered this senseless tragedy. The result was the Treaty of La Pointe, signed on Madeline Island. This treaty guaranteed the remaining tribes their land “for as long as the grass shall grow and the sun shall shine.” The modern reservation system was born.

## CHAPTER 44

The following Sunday, the renegades met for the second time. This meeting was at Rhoda's house. This time, the original seven were joined by Ed Nightsky. Rhoda, Charley, and Mike Deerwalker were there, as were Ted Moreaux, Richard Bigboy, and Ron Blackbird. Now they were eight. They were meeting to report on progress made and brainstorm on problems remaining. Nora, who had fallen into the role of chairwoman, called the meeting to order.

"I guess I'll go first," said Nora. "Ed and I have been working on the distraction problem. I had to include Ed in our group. In a marriage like ours, there's no way to have secrets, and Ed's knowledge and access could prove invaluable."

There was no objection to including Ed in the group, especially since he seemed to be a willing contributor.

Nora went on to explain how they were waiting for Yellow Moon to decide on whether or not to send a dance team. "If he agrees, his bunch of dancers would be strong enough and gutsy enough to dance their way right into Hightower's office, if that was what was required of them.

Richard Bigboy asked Nora, "Did you have to tell Yellow Moon about the plan?"

"I'm afraid I did. If I wasn't completely honest with him, I

didn't think he would even have considered it for a second."

"I'm sure that was the case, but if we keep telling more and more people about our scheme, how can we hope to maintain operational security?"

"I don't think Yellow Moon is going to tell anyone, but you're right, Richard, we have to watch out for loose lips," said Nora. "But back to the subject of the diversion, if Yellow Moon's band declines our invitation, we'll have to enlist another group or come up with another idea. But they're our best bet. Fiercely independent, tough, and damn good dancers. I haven't worked out all the details yet, but I sort of envision these young bucks in war paint whooping and hollering around the entrance. That ought to bring the security guards running, don't you think, Mike?"

"If it was me on duty, I'd want to see what was going on," replied Mike. "I just hope they can keep the commotion going on long enough for Ted to finish his work."

"I'll keep working on the plan and refining it. I'm open to suggestions. If anyone has any ideas, please let me know. Mike, do you have any progress to report?"

Mike told the group about his progress with the key and added, "So while I have pretty easy access when Hightower's out of the office, I can't get the key while he's there. I need to have a backup plan to get Hightower out of there. Maybe a call from Mike or Ted—I don't know. Any suggestions?"

Rhoda brought the group up to date on her conversation with Little Wind. "According to instructions, I've set up an anonymous mailbox and only use the public computers at the library or the coffee shop. I uploaded Ted's copy of the old program for Little Wind to see what they're up against. I expect to hear a final decision from them this week."

Ted told them about his idea for defeating the security cameras, the ones that were focused on the Eagle. "The solution was literally staring me in the face the whole time. It's simply a matter of rewinding an hour or two's worth of recorded tape and playing it back through the video screens. No one can tell one hour

from the next. Believe me; they all look alike, one person after another putting money in the machine and pulling the big lever. It's hard to watch more than a few minutes of it without nodding off. There's no one assigned to watching those screens; the Eagle is only recorded because the state requires it. Oh, and I've ordered the latest copy of the Progressive slot program, the kind that the Eagle is running right now. The manufacturer is going to send it to the casino in care of a Mister White Flower in surveillance. We'll need to intercept it when it arrives. Anyone have an idea how we might do that?"

"Anybody know anything about where and when the mail arrives?" asked Nora.

"I think the mailman drops all mail at the hotel desk," said Charley. "The desk clerk sorts through it and puts it in boxes behind the reception desk. Later, Ricki comes and picks up the mail for management and delivers it."

"What would the desk clerk do with something for an employee he never heard of?"

"I don't think the clerk knows all of the employees' names," said Ted, "and White Flower sounds Indian enough. He'll see surveillance on the package and put it in Gary Standinghorse's mailbox."

"I wish you'd have picked a less provocative name," chided Nora. "Why did you have to be cute?"

Ted just shrugged and gave Nora a goofy smile.

"Well there you go, Mike," Nora said. "You'll have to figure out a way to relieve Ricki of the package before she delivers the mail to Gary Standinghorse."

"Yikes. I'll give it a try, but I can't guarantee any results. When do you expect the package?"

"Tuesday."

"Okay. Moving along, Richard Bigboy, you have the power failure problem," Nora said. "Have you thought of anything?"

"I hate to let everyone down, but I haven't been able to come up with any clever way to get the power to blink exactly

when we need it. I'm sorry. I told you I was no electrician. We need someone on the inside, someone with access to the circuit breakers." All of a sudden Richard's eyes met Ed Nightsky's, and both men smiled conspiratorially.

Ed Nightsky got to his feet and said, "I want you all to know that I'm proud to be a part of this project. I've been thinking about the electricity problem ever since Nora and Richard mentioned it to me. You all know that I'm the custodian at the casino. I have access to the utility room and could flip a switch that will interrupt the power without too much trouble. What I can't figure out is exactly when to do it. If someone could send me a signal that it was time, then that would solve that problem."

"Now that's something I could do," said Richard Bigboy, relieved to have a part in the caper.

After the business part of the meeting ended, the friends were sitting in Rhoda's living room sipping coffee and nibbling cookies. Rhoda said, "I know it's a little late in the day for second thoughts, but I was wondering if maybe we're being more than a little naive. I mean we're not exactly criminal masterminds. We're not even petty thieves. We're just ordinary people on the verge of rushing into something that might go very wrong. In my last job, I got a man killed by being rash and foolish. I'd hate any of us to get hurt because of something I did or failed to do."

"What are you trying to say, Rhoda?" asked Nora.

"I'm just wondering if maybe there isn't an easier way to shake some money out of the casino. You know, something not so risky, with not so many things to go wrong?"

Charley answered, "If you're thinking about things like card counting, that's not going to work. I see a lot of that at the blackjack table, amateurs mostly, trying to remember how many aces are left in the deck. It was all the rage a few years ago, but now the casinos have virtually eliminated it. It's devilishly hard to do even with one deck, but now that we use a shoe that can hold ten decks, you'd need a doctorate in mathematics to calculate the



odds.

“But even if you’re a master at it and can keep ten decks counted in your head, I’ve been trained to watch for it. Besides, all the real pros are known to surveillance, and if they spot a serious counter, security gives them the heave-ho. But in a way you’re right, it’s pretty hard to detect, and in the long run, it does dramatically improve your chances of winning. I’m sure the casino loses some money to card counters every year, but luckily for the casino, most people are terrible at it.

“But let’s say you were a good card counter and didn’t get caught, and you got into a game at my table and counted all the cards successfully, you still couldn’t win all that much.”

“Why’s that?” asked Rhoda.

“Because all of our blackjack tables have one-hundred-dollar betting limits. If you can’t bet more than a hundred dollars a hand, it will take you a hundred years to win ten million dollars. If you’re looking to make more than a couple of thousand dollars, Bad River’s the wrong place to do it. The pros are counting cards at the high stakes tables in Vegas or wherever. No one comes to Bad River to make a big score.”

## CHAPTER 45

At eleven thirty on Monday morning two weeks before the powwow, Mike watched Ricki Lake exit the elevator and slink her showgirl body across the casino to the hotel where she picked up the mail. Every male head turned to follow her progress. She walked to the reception desk and engaged in a little conversation with Thomas Cloud, the clerk on duty at that hour. He blushed and handed her the mail for the casino executives and the surveillance room employees. Ricki sorted through the pile on her way back to the elevator. The elevator doors were just closing when Mike stuck his arm between them and stepped inside.

“Hi, Ricki.” Mike looked down at the pile of mail in Ricki’s hand. “Looks like a lot of mail today.”

Ricki shrugged, “About the same as usual. You coming to see me?”

“It’s always a treat to see you. Rick, but today I’m on my way to the surveillance room. Would you like me to bring them their mail?”

“That’s sweet of you to ask, Mike, but I could use the walk.”

The doors opened, and she started toward the surveillance room. Mike kept a cool head. He said, “Ah, you know I overheard a rumor that a bunch of surveillance guys were going to play a joke

on Mr. Hightower. Would you take a look and see if there's something there for a Mr. Hi White Flower?"

Ricki started looking through the mail. "Hi White Flower? I don't think we even have anyone by that name working here."

"Please, Rick, give it a look for me."

"Why do you care about someone else's mail anyway, Mike? Mail is personal and private, you know that." Ricki started walking away.

This wasn't going quite as he envisioned. Thinking quickly, he said, "I'm trying to prevent Mr. Hightower from being embarrassed in front of all the employees."

"Could you explain that?" asked Ricki.

Mike improvised, "Well, there really isn't anyone by that name. It's a joke. You see, someone signed Mr. Hightower up for a book club, and they twisted his name around to Hi White Flower. It's a joke, a prank; they're making fun of him."

Ricki looked at him blankly, "I don't get it."

"Dwight Hightower—Hi White Flower," Mike explained.

Silence. Then, "Oh, now I get it," said Ricki laughing.

"That's pretty funny."

"I know it's funny. That's the point. If it gets around the casino, everyone will be calling your boss Hi White Flower. Every time he walks into a room, someone will say, 'Hi, white flower.' They'll be laughing at him. You don't want Mr. H to be a laughing-stock, do you?"

"No. No, I don't want people laughing at Mr. Hightower. He's a nice man. He's always been very sweet to me, buying me gifts and all. So sure, Mike, I'll help you out." She looked through the mail again. "Nope. No White Flower today. Maybe tomorrow. If I see it, I'll give it to you."

"Thanks, Ricki. You're kind and sensitive as well as beautiful. How about a drink after work?"

"Not tonight, Mike. I have a hair appointment at four. It's awfully sweet of you to ask, though." She gave Mike her sweetest smile and swished off down the hall.

Rhoda drove the few miles into Ashland and parked near the library. She was there early and found an unoccupied computer. She signed in to her anonymous e-mail account. She uttered an almost audible “yes” when she saw she had a message from Toshi and Little Wind.

Toshi’s message was long and detailed, but the first few words set Rhoda’s blood racing. The message read in part:

After much discussion, the members of Little Wind have voted to assist you in your quest for justice against the forces of greed and corruption. Little Wind stands beside the oppressed indigenous peoples of North America.

To Rhoda, this sounded like a lot like left-wing propaganda, but the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that what the group was attempting was a political act.

The rest of the message laid out the steps that needed to be done before Little Wind could get to work. First of all, they needed an up-to-date copy of the program the Eagle was running. Rhoda had already sent the older version and hoped to have the new one at any moment.

Second, the hackers needed to know where the Phoenix Corporation’s central computer was located. Toshi thought that Little Wind might need to hack its way into the corporation’s mainframe to obtain the Eagle’s pass codes. That seemed the most direct way to get the current codes. It was essential to the success of the plan that Ted have the actual, accurate, up-to-the minute pass codes. They were the only way the conspirators could modify the Eagle’s program on the first try. They would have only one shot at changing the program. If there were any glitches, there would be no second chance.

The third item on Toshi’s wish list was the name and e-mail address of at least one high level executive at the Phoenix Corporation, preferably someone with a top security clearance. They needed this, Toshi explained, in case they had to try another way into the central computer. Toshi called it the back door.

Rhoda set to work on getting Toshi the information he needed. First, she Googled a list of Phoenix-owned casinos and jotted down their names. Next, she went to the Phoenix Corporation's web site and called the main office. When an operator asked her who she wanted to speak to, Rhoda introduced herself as the manager of the Grindstone Casino in Red Lodge, Wisconsin. This was a casino Phoenix did not yet own but was probably interested in acquiring or doing business with.

"I'd like to speak with someone in charge of your progressive slot network."

The operator transferred her to Carl Warren, vice president of the progressive slot division. Mr. Warren was a harried thirty-something mid-level manager on a career path to nowhere. A good sale might just help him land a promotion.

"Warren, here; how can I help you?"

Rhoda put on her best business manager's voice and said, "Yes, hello, Mr. Warren, I'm Roberta Grassley, the casino manager over at Grindstone. Have you heard of us?"

"Why, yes, Ms. Grassley, I know your casino very well. What can the Phoenix Corporation do for you?"

"Our board of directors asked me to look into the possibility of adding a couple of Phoenix's progressives to our mix at Grindstone."

"Well, you've come to the right place, Miss Grassley." And now, Rhoda could hear a bit of enthusiasm creeping into Mr. Warren's voice as he launched into his sales pitch. After fifteen minutes of listening to the benefits of the Phoenix program, Rhoda steered the conversation around to security.

"You'll have no worries there," said Warren. "I can assure you, Miss Grassley. Our computer security is top notch. We only use the most up-to-date equipment, running state-of-the-art software. It's triple secure and completely un-hackable. In our twelve years in the business, we haven't lost a penny."

"That's what I wanted to hear, Mr. Warren," said Rhoda. "And this state-of-the-art equipment is located there at your head-

quarters in Detroit?”

“No. We keep the corporate computer separate from the progressive slot computer for security reasons. We have a completely separate facility for the progressive main frame in Toulouse, Michigan. That’s a suburb of Detroit.”

After some more talk, Rhoda had the address of the facility. She thanked Mr. Warren and rang off.

Back on the library computer, Rhoda sent Toshi the address and phone number of the Phoenix Corporation’s progressive slot facility in Toulouse, Michigan, along with the name and title of Mr. Carl Warren.

The next day, Tuesday, Mike arranged to be in position to intercept Ricki on her way back with the mail. She was looking through the stack of mail as she waited for the elevator. This time there was a package for a Mr. White Flower. She waved the envelope at Mike and was just about to hand it to him when Neal Arnold stepped out of the elevator. He saw Mike approaching and said “Ah, Mike, Albani’s looking for you. Something wrong with your radio? Better put your earpiece in and contact him before he splits a gut.” Then turning to Ricki, he said, “And how’s the beautiful Ricki Rice today?”

Mike had no choice but to turn around and leave. The elevator doors closed on Ricki and Neal Arnold, so he couldn’t intercept her at the top of the stairs. He could only hope that she remembered to keep the White Flower package aside.

He found an angry Albani and suffered through a tedious lecture about being in contact at all times. He spent the next few hours on pins and needles until Albani ordered him to go and get the maintenance room key. When he finally got to Hightower’s office, Ricki was on the phone. She motioned that the boss was out and he should get the key himself. When he came out of Hightower’s office, Ricki handed him the package.

In Nogata, Japan, Toshi and two companions planned their

attack. Toshi put his young protégé, Tara, to work on the progressive slot software. Tara was a fourteen-year-old computer savant. She had never known a world without computers. Her grasp of programming was beyond intuitive; she could read code like anyone else could read a novel, only faster.

Tara's job was to read and understand the new program, to know precisely which bits of code were the bits they needed to alter and where exactly in that huge program were the instructions that told the Silver Eagle to pay the jackpot. It was, after all, only a matter of instruction. Computers could only do what they were told to do. If you wanted a slot machine to pay out on the forty-seventh play, you wrote that instruction, found the correct line among the tens of thousands of lines, and inserted it there, and your job was done. Tara read through the endless lines of code, tracking her quarry.

Computer programs are among man's most intricate constructions. Every line of code has a specific purpose, every number a reason, and a missed punctuation mark could bring the whole program to a crashing halt. So it was a complex path that Tara followed to that place in the program. It was fortunate that she had studied the older version of the program for the past few days. The new version wasn't all that different.

The other member of Toshi's team was the legendary Australian hacker, Mitt Darwin, a brawny, thirty-five-year-old giant whose rugby player's build belied his geek persona. Darwin was famous in hacker circles for having hacked into NORAD's (North Atlantic Defense Command's) computer, causing them to scramble a dozen fighters in search of a radar blip drawn in the shape of a smiley face.

Of course, this was before he joined Little Wind and became a white hat hacker. White hats hack with a social conscience, as opposed to black hats, who only cause mischief.

Darwin's job was to break into the Phoenix Corporation's central computer. Once inside the network, Darwin was to search for the pass codes to the Silver Eagle and develop a "root kit." The

root kit was a piece of software hackers used to cover their tracks. The root kit effectively removed any record of entry. Darwin thought of it as brushing away his footprints. Little Wind would have to develop a root kit for the Indians to use on their machine. If the program revealed any sign of tampering, the casino would not pay.

Toshi jumped back and forth between Tara and Darwin, suggesting lines of attack and keeping the project on track and on schedule.

Tara eventually located the place in the code she felt certain related to the ratio of spins to wins, and called Toshi over to see it. She rewrote pieces of code and ran the program several times on a simulator. If it crashed, she went back and tweaked it. It would be tedious work for most mortals, but it was fun for Tara. She wrote a line of code here, changed a parameter there, and after a while, the program didn't crash. And best of all, on the forty-seventh pull of the lever, it came up eagles straight across the screen. Jackpot!

Tara's part of the hack took nine hours. She inserted the lines of code that told the Silver Eagle to pay the full jackpot on the forty-seventh coin. Toshi thought it best to have a little space between the time the Eagle's program was switched and the actual payout, but not too much time. He picked forty-seven because it was a lucky number for him. Phoenix had the Eagle set to pay off once in every hundred thousand plays, or once every ten years. The Phoenix Corporation had never paid out a full jackpot at Bad River or, for all anyone knew, in any of their casinos.

Darwin was attempting to "crash the gate" on the Phoenix web site. This meant he was attempting to force his way in past the company's firewall. Anyone looking to gain access to the computer in this direct way is asked for his user ID and password. Without these two elements, access is denied. To prevent hacking, the firewall only permits three attempts. Get it wrong three times in a row, and you are shut out for twenty-four hours. A brute force attack tries every possible combination of letters and numbers until the right combination comes up. There's not much finesse in it, but



it's direct and it works every time. Little Wind had long experience with this method of entry and had developed many ingenious programs to defeat the firewall and keep the submit door open for as long as needed. Depending upon the complexity of the user ID and the password, a brute force attack could take anywhere from a few hours to a few days.

To make their efforts easier, Rhoda had sent Toshi the old ID and password combination that Ted had saved from the Eagle's initial installation. This gave Darwin a pattern to work with. Assuming the current password followed the same pattern, six digits bracketed by two uppercase letters, it looked something like this: A123456X. Passwords and their numerical equivalents, pass codes, were the least of a hacker's problems. To a hacker, a password or pass code was like a flimsy padlock—you could either break it or pick it. Either way, it didn't slow you down that much.

A brute force attack was simply a matter of applying the mathematics of probability to a finite series: trying every possible combination until one worked. There are only so many ways to combine six digits and two letters. In the case of an eight-digit pass code, even if the entire computer keyboard was used, including punctuation marks, upper and lower case letters, and all of the other symbols available, there are still only a finite number of combinations. A large number, to be sure, but knowing that there were two letters bracketing six numbers lowered the possible number of combinations to a mere twelve billion. Given that Darwin's computer could run two hundred million combinations an hour, it might take a weekend to hit the right pattern.

Toshi suggested they try two different approaches. Darwin would try to crash the gate while Toshi would use a more subtle method. He would try to slip into Carl Warren's personal computer through its back door. The back door is any place a computer is connected to the Internet—that is, through its modem—and once inside, rummage through Mr. Warren's hard drive until he found the access codes to the Phoenix Corporation's mainframe.

Toshi's approach was more subtle than Darwin's, but not much more. All of Carl Warren's entry points were password protected. But Toshi knew how poor that protection really was. Passwords were generally short combinations of numbers and letters and often real words or easy to remember names, dates, or zip codes. No one wanted to forget their own password or have one so complicated that it had to be written down where it could easily be stolen. So most people created their passwords out of names or dates or places they could easily remember. There are only so many words and combinations of numbers in the world. A modern computer can try a billion combinations in a few hours.

Toshi went on line and easily found Carl Warren's home e-mail address. He also found several articles and biographies in trade journals and Who's Who in Business. It wasn't too hard to find significant names and dates from Warren's personal history. Things like birth dates, anniversaries, zip codes, and a host of other personal data. Special lock-picking programs tried millions of variations in spelling and combinations of names and dates. Toshi pinged Warren's computer and found it was on line and active.

Warren's computer was, at that very moment, sitting on his desk in his home office. Both Carl Warren and his computer were asleep. Toshi woke the computer up by knocking on its back door. All modern computers permit "remote access," a convenience feature allowing one computer to communicate with another. Naturally, Warren's backdoor was password protected.

After only two hours of trying, Toshi had Warren's passwords. It was a simple zip code and initial combination. Once in the backdoor, Toshi had complete access to Warren's hard drive and minutes later had the password and user ID to the company mainframe. He was about to tease Darwin with the news when the big man swiveled around in his chair and crowed, "I'm in!" Both cracks took the same amount of time—four hours.

Toshi's crack was harder to trace and easier to cover, so they logged in to the Phoenix Corporation's mainframe using Warren's access code right from the company's web site. Since

Warren was the vice president in charge of the progressive slot network, it stood to reason that he had high-level access to all of the pass codes in all of the machines on the network. After a little poking around, they had a list of pass codes to all of the progressive slots that the Phoenix Corporation owned. If they had wanted, they could have rigged them all. They added the crucial information to the disc they were preparing for Rhoda. Little Wind's job was done. They had altered the program to pay the jackpot on the forty-seventh pull, they provided a "root kit" to cover their tracks and leave no record of tampering, and, finally, they provided the conspirators with up-to-the-minute pass codes with which to access the Silver eagle's programming. When it was done Toshi transmitted the file to Rhoda, who burned it to a CD. The crazy scheme had taken on a life of its own, and the disparate pieces were coming together.

## CHAPTER 46

Yellow Moon sweated, fasted, and meditated, waiting for a vision to show him the way. After three days, he announced that the La Pointe braves would dance at the powwow and would create a distraction.

Yellow Moon's reasons were not the same as Nora's. Yellow Moon was not motivated by altruism. He did not really care about the ten-million-dollar jackpot. He was thinking about the long history of the Chippewa in America, the broken treaties, the Sandy Lake Tragedy, the smallpox, the corrupt Indian agents, and the reduction of a once-proud nation to poverty. He thought of these things and saw the casino and its masters as symbols of all that went wrong for his people since that first contact with French fur traders four hundred years earlier. If there was a chance to strike a blow and make some white men unhappy, then that was reason enough for Yellow Moon to agree. His true motivation was revenge.

D'nashta paddled to the mainland and made his way to his parent's house. He gave Nora the news of Yellow Moon's decision. "Yellow Moon said to tell you he will dance in the warrior spirit and count coup on the white invader." Counting coup was an old warrior tradition of facing the enemy without fear.

Nora wasn't sure she liked the sound of that but was happy that she had recruited a strong ally; she was, in fact, greatly relieved. She hugged her son and offered him lunch. "No thank you, Mother, there is no time." D'nashta changed out of his native buckskins and into Western clothes. In this simple act, he transformed himself from D'nashta, Chippewa brave, to Kevin Nightsky, teenage American boy. He said goodbye to his mother and headed into Ashland, six miles away.

He walked to a hardware store in the city and purchased two cans of spray paint and two cans of Sterno and taped them to his body. With his purchases concealed, he walked to the casino, mingled with a busload of visitors, and blended with the crowd.

In the casino, Kevin found a seat in a corner in front of a nickel slot machine and played for a while; all the time keeping an eye out for his cousin, Ralph Nightsky. Ralph passed by and opened a supply closet nearby. When Kevin saw Ralph open the closet, he stood up from his machine and slipped inside. A few seconds later, Ralph emerged from the closet pushing a large cleaning cart. He wheeled the cart to one of the casino's many bathrooms and put up his wet floor pyramids and Restroom Closed for Service signs on the doors.

Ralph pushed the service cart into the women's room and began cleaning it. Kevin emerged from his hiding place in the cleaning cart and with a few quick strokes, spray-painted "This is Chippewa land" on the row of stall doors and "Indian resistance" on the mirrors over the sinks. Then, he emptied a can of Sterno into an empty garbage can. He hung a pack of matches closed around a lit cigarette from a thread over the Sterno. When the cigarette burned its way to the matches, they would ignite, burn the thread, and fall into the Sterno. The resulting fire would cause alarm but do no real damage.

He signed his work with the symbol of a red bird, and climbed back into the cleaning cart for the short journey to the men's room. After Ralph finished cleaning the men's room, Kevin did the same thing in there. When Kevin's work was done, he

climbed back into his hiding place in the cleaning cart and Ralph pushed it back to the supply closet. Kevin slipped away while Ralph went about his business as if nothing had happened. Later, when the tape was reviewed, the security people would scratch their heads, wondering how the vandal had eluded them.

As Kevin left the casino, he dropped the spray cans into a trash bin. Behind him he could hear the first panicky screams from the women's bathroom. Kevin walked back to his mother's house and changed back into his traditional garb, becoming D'nashta once again. That evening, he sat with Yellow Moon and the other braves around the fire and planned more mischief.

On the last weekend before the powwow, Rhoda invited Bill to come up and see her again. She needed his comforting presence. She hadn't told him about the caper. She wasn't sure how he would react, and her own grip on the ethics of what she was doing was not all that firm. She was afraid, too, that if she told him, he would express disappointment in her and try to talk her out of it. But she wanted to see him, and that alone was incentive enough. Bill, of course, accepted her invitation and made the long drive north. She met him at the casino, and they went immediately to his room. A half-hour later, their heart rates slowed enough so that they could finally speak in whole sentences.

They showered and dressed for dinner. Rhoda booked a table at the best restaurant in Ashland, a Viet Nameese place on the lake. The food was delicate and delicious. Rhoda's dark hair tumbled to her shoulders, and her eyes sparkled in the candlelight.

Bill was pleased to see Rhoda so composed and happy. They made small talk for a while, but after a few minutes the talk died away, and he looked at her and said, "You know, Rhoda, when Claire and I broke up, I pretty near gave up on women and romance. I figured I'd screwed up enough relationships for one lifetime. I resigned myself to living alone and talking to my birds. In fact, I've been rehearsing this speech with them for the past few weeks. I've gone over it so many times I'm afraid it's going to

sound like I am reciting it from memory.”

Bill took her hands and squeezed them, “Damn it all, Rhoda, what I’m trying to say is would you mind having an old policeman hanging around for the rest of your life? God, that didn’t sound anything like I rehearsed.”

Rhoda blushed and smiled. “Bill O’Halloran, are you asking me to marry you?”

Bill reached into his pocket and his hand emerged holding a ring box. He opened it to reveal a ring with a tiny diamond mounted in it. “I guess that’s what I’m saying,” he stammered. “I thought it would go a lot smoother, but yes, Rhoda, I love you and want to marry you. So what do you think? As one cop to another, do you think we have a chance?”

“Professionally speaking, it’s probably a terrible idea: flimsy evidence, conflicts of interest, unreliable witnesses; but speaking personally, I think it’s a great idea.”

“Was that a yes?” Bill asked, his face contorted between joy and disappointment.

“That’s a yes,” confirmed Rhoda, kissing his hand.

That nerve-wracking moment out of the way, Bill and Rhoda finished their meal and talked of their future together. Bill thought he was ready for a change of scene and a new direction. Rhoda wasn’t sure she wanted to go back to Fish and Wildlife. “Well, at least we’re flexible,” said Bill.

After dinner, they joined the crowd on the casino floor and played a little roulette and a little blackjack. They won a few dollars at both games and decided to take their winnings and spend it in the bar. They sat in the bar, and Bill ordered two fancy mixed drinks in silly glasses with paper parasols. They toasted their futures and shared a laugh or two. Rhoda decided not to say anything about the caper planned for the following week. She loved Bill, and while she didn’t want to keep secrets from him, she didn’t want to make him an accomplice in her risky conspiracy.

They were sitting at the bar next to a rumpled old man who was muttering to himself. Out of nowhere, the stranger turned to

Rhoda and said, "How's your luck running this evening?"

Rhoda said, "I'm sorry; are you speaking to me?"

"My system," the man said taking a worn sheet of paper from his pocket, "I've spent the last twenty years perfecting my system."

"What system?" Rhoda asks.

"My system for roulette. It's taken me years, but I have it all worked out. If you're interested, I'll sell it to you for a hundred dollars." The old man looked hopefully from Rhoda to Bill. Rhoda told him she had had enough luck for one night. The man shook his head in disappointment, put away the paper, and left.

The bartender came over to see how Rhoda and Bill were doing. Rhoda asked him if he knew what the old guy was talking about. The bartender said, "Oh sure, I see a couple of guys like him a month. They all think they can game the game, beat the house, turn the odds in their favor. It can't be done; there are no mathematical loopholes."

"Why's that?" asked Bill.

"It's like this," said the bartender warming to his subject. "It's human nature to look for patterns even where none exist. This trait among gamblers is called the "doctrine of the maturity of chances." Say you're playing roulette and five red numbers come up in a row; you think to yourself, hmm, it's time to put some money on black. Black is overdue. It's human nature to think that way. But the truth is that every spin of the wheel and every throw of the dice are independent of every other. The roulette ball has no memory of the last time it was played. Every spin has the same odds, no matter what came before.

"There are a million schemes out there. Some of them are famous; none of them works. A good example I like to use is the Martingale. That's a scheme where you keep doubling every losing bet until you finally win your money back. It may work for a while, but in the end, the house always wins."

"And the guy who sold you the scheme," added Bill.

"And the guy who sold you the scheme," chorused the



bartender.

The six conspirators sat around a table at Nora's house on the last Sunday before the powwow. Nora called the meeting to order,

“Well, gang, we're a week away from the big day. We'll have one more meeting before zero hour. Let's go over our list and see how we're doing. The first item is the cameras. Ted, that's your baby. What's the status?”

“I rewound the tape a couple of times and no one noticed. Once, I left it running for an hour and once, for forty minutes. It's impossible to tell one hour from the next; unless something weird happens and security needs to review the tape, no will notice the missing hour. On the day we do the deed, I'll do a one-hour re-wind, come down and do the hack, and then go back up and put the cameras back on record.”

“Any complications you can foresee?” asked Nora.

“No. The camera part seems pretty straightforward. The only thing that could trip us up is our distraction. If surveillance wants to review the distraction from those three cameras, it might get a little sticky. So just to be safe, let's keep the distraction as far away from the Eagle as possible.”

“Number two on the problems list is the guards. That's your department, Mike. Is the guard thing under control?”

Mike reported, “The whole purpose of the distraction is to direct security's attention away from the Silver Eagle. The guards will go where the trouble is. Tell me what you have planned for the distraction, and I'll tell you how the guards will react.”

“Well, as far as the distraction goes,” Nora confessed, “I'm happy to report that Yellow Moon and his La Pointe Braves have agreed to come and dance at the casino and are willing to work with us. I'm not exactly sure what they have in mind, but they assured me it will bring the casino to a halt. I told Yellow Moon we need to keep the security people busy for at least ten minutes while Ted fixes the machine. Yellow Moon says he can do ten minutes,

no problem. I'll try to get more details from him this week."

"There's not much the dancers can do from the parking lot that's going to help Ted on the inside," said Charlie

"I'll suggest he bring the braves inside," agreed Nora. "I think he's willing to do anything, including taking a few scalps. Remember that we can abort the mission at any time. We all have each other's phone numbers. If something goes wrong, we just call it off, and no harm's done. So moving on, number three on my list is the key. Mike, how's that project coming?"

"It's coming along well. I have access to the key cabinet whenever Hightower is out of the office. When he's out, it's a simple matter of borrowing the Eagle's key along with the maintenance room key and then returning them later. The only problem is that Hightower might be in his office. If that happens, we'll have to get him out of there. Any ideas on how to do that would be appreciated."

Ron said, "If you let me know, I'll call the office and tell Ricki that one of the owners or some politician is downstairs waiting. That should bring him running."

"That's good," Nora said, "In fact, chances are pretty good there will be important visitors there. I know there were plenty there at last year's powwow. Ron, you want to position yourself to call that in if Mike tells you Hightower is at his desk? Number four is the password and the hacked program. Rhoda, those are your problems; any progress?"

"I have good progress to report," Rhoda replied. "Our friends at Little Wind have been hard at work cracking the new program and getting the Eagle's pass codes. In their latest e-mail, they reported success on both fronts. They obtained the current pass codes for the Eagle and have modified the program to pay out after forty-seven plays. They've thoroughly tested and retested everything. I have the CD here." She handed it to Ted.

"Why forty-seven plays?" asked Mike.

"Little Wind thought it would look suspicious if the Eagle paid out immediately after the confusion. The distraction would

look like what it was, and it might alert the surveillance people to take a closer look. Once the casino calms down and gets back to normal, our diversion won't look connected to the jackpot."

"You foresee any problems?" Ted asked.

"Not really, aside from getting caught or someone winning the jackpot before us."

"Everything seems to be coming together very nicely," said Nora. "Number four is the power failure. We put Ron and Ed on that one. Have you guys worked out a way to cut the power? Ron? Ed?"

Ed answered, "Ron will be running the sound system at the dance pavilion. When the time is right, he'll cause a short circuit, which will pop a breaker. I'll be in the basement when the breaker pops, and I'll accidentally switch the main breaker off and on. That should cause the computers to reset, don't you think?"

"That ought to do it," said Ted. "I'll call down to Ed when I'm ready to load in the hacked program. The Eagle will reboot with the hacked program, and that will be that."

"The last thing to discuss is the timing, Ted. You have to get in and out of there in a few minutes. You think you can do it?"

"Just give me five minutes from the power blink, and I'll have it done."

"Well, that's it, then," says Nora. "All that remains is the fine tuning. Everyone be sure to put all cell phone numbers into your phones, and make sure one of us is there for the forty-seventh spin."

Rhoda said, "I was thinking of giving that honor to Dancing Bear, if it's all right with you guys."

Everyone thought that was a fine idea, and the meeting broke up. There would be one more meeting the evening before the big day.

## CHAPTER 47

For one shining weekend a year, the shabby Indian town of Odanah, Wisconsin, becomes a carnival of color and a hubbub of activity. The weedy old ball field gets mowed and magically transformed into a fairground, covered with stalls and booths. The stalls sell everything from beadwork to books to fry bread and frozen Snickers. It could be a county fair in any small midwestern town except for the strange music and feather-covered participants. The weather on this Friday, the fifth of September, was fall perfect: sparkling, crisp, and clear. There was a big crowd on hand, but it would be bigger on Saturday and biggest of all on Sunday. Sunday was the day the renegades had chosen to make their play.

For several days preceding the powwow, various groups of guests and dancers had been arriving. The dance troops, called “drums,” varied in size from twelve to thirty members. At a powwow this size, there could be as many as five hundred participants. A small tent city sprang up in part of the field. It was a credit to Nora and the powwow committee that everyone was made welcome, assigned a place, and provided with water and sewer services.

There were fifteen drums dancing at Bad River on this weekend. Four drums were homegrown. Others came from neighboring reservations. They all came to compete and celebrate. A

powwow was a place to visit friends and family. It was also a place for young men and women to meet one another. Finding a mate at a powwow was not uncommon. In fact, there was a word for it in the local slang, it was called “snagging.” The young dancers eyed each other, flirted, and hoped to snag a mate. The actual dance competition was friendly and the trophies and money awards were small, but it was a chance to show off and gain bragging rights.

A drum consisted of four or five troops of dancers. Each troop specialized in one of a half a dozen dances. Each dance had its own rhythm, steps, outfits, and songs. Men and women had their own dances and their own songs. Some were ancient and traditional, and some, because it was a living culture, were new and evolving.

The actual drum, the instrument that provided the rhythm and heartbeat of the powwow, was a sacred object. The drum was the only musical instrument used in all the dances. It was an imposing object, four to six feet in diameter and covered with cow or buffalo hide. As many as eight singers sat around this object and struck it in unison with hide-covered mallets.

The drum was a female spirit, having been given to the people by a woman in the time of myths. As with every item used in ceremonies, there was a spiritual component to the drum. It was believed to have the power to reconcile the physical with the spiritual side of human nature. The regular beating of the great heart brought balance and rejuvenation to both player and listener.

Sitting around the great drum, the singers chanted and blended their voices, creating counter rhythms and harmonies that mimicked natural sounds. The songs themselves could be ancient and traditional or personal and individual. They were poems describing the wholeness of life and the joys of this world.

But if the drum was the heart, dancing was the soul of the powwow. The dance steps might be proscribed by tradition, but the outfits the dancers wore were a complex blend of tradition and individual expression. The bits of decoration worn by an individual dancer represented meaningful events in his or her personal jour-

ney through life. The outfits were properly called “regalia” and were never to be referred to as “costumes.” A costume implied something artificial, not a part of a living culture, whereas, dancing, singing, and the powwow itself were essential parts of being Indian.

Every powwow began with a Grand Entry, pageantry akin to the opening ceremonies at the Olympics. The audience stood as the participants entered the arena decked out in their finest regalia. The parade was led by the host’s tribal leaders. They were followed by visiting dignitaries, a color guard, and all the veterans from any war in which Native Americans have served, which was all of them. Next came the elected royalty, the Rice Queen and King and their court. Finally, the drums entered in full regalia, each troupe in its colorful finery. When the last drum had entered, the welcome dance began. Several hundred dancers in full regalia filled the dance floor with motion and color. It was quite a spectacle.

After the Grand Entry, the competition dancing began. The emcee for the powwow, Robert Bigboy, announced the first dance group. The emcee set the tone and the pace of the powwow. He called the dances and narrated the action. He joked and informed and kept things lively. Robert Bigboy had been doing Bad River’s Wild Rice Harvest powwow for many years.

“The first troop up is a men’s traditional dance group from right here on the rez. A big hand for the Bear Hollow Warriors. These boys will be doing a traditional Snake Dance. For those of you who aren’t familiar with traditional dancing, I’ll explain. The dance represents the actions of the warrior: tracking, fighting, killing game. The steps imitate those essential skills. The dancers wear breastplates made of bone or shell to protect against enemy arrows and beaded chokers to protect them against knives, and they carry shields decorated with animal totems and traditional tribal designs. They wear a single eagle feather bustle on their hip and bells on their ankles. Don’t they look spectacular, folks?” When the Bear Hollow Warriors were finished, there was a smattering of applause. Robert Bigboy bounded up to the microphone.

“That was great. Now, lets give the ladies a chance to respond with a traditional dance of their own. Our second troupe has come down from Canada just to show us southerners how it’s done. Lets make welcome the Dancing Bluebells from Ontario, six beautiful young ladies who will show us the Corn Dance. You’ll notice the beautifully beaded dresses. Every girl carries a fringed shawl and a feather fan. Watch their footwork, folks, very precise and very focused. You’ll see them raise and open their fans at exactly the same time.”

Then it was men’s grass dancers, another more energetic warrior dance where the dancers wore quill and bone headpieces called roaches, and each dancer wore long strands of ribbon to represent the grass. The ribbons streamed out behind as the dancers turned and jumped.

When it was the women’s turn again, their dance was everyone’s favorite—the Jingle Dress Dance, a relatively new addition but a real crowd pleaser. Each jingle dress supported rows and rows of handmade metal cones. Tradition says the cones were made from snuff tin lids. A jingle dress could have four to seven hundred bells. The rhythm of the dance took full advantage of the bells’ tinkling sound.

There was also women’s fancy shawl dancing and men’s fancy dancing. Both were relatively new additions to the pow-wow repertoire and were extremely colorful and energetic dances. The men’s fancy dance required great stamina and agility. It was a dance for young braves who trained seriously all year long. The regalia were brightly colored feather bustles, beaded arm- and headbands, and ribbons and streamers, though not as many as the grass dancers. The women’s fancy shawl dance was similar. It was filled with swirling shawls and leaping bodies.

It was the fancy Shawl Dance that Nora had scheduled to perform at the casino on Friday. She had asked the Chippewa Girl’s Heritage Society to entertain the gamblers at a one o’clock show and again at a two-thirty show. The girls were happy to

oblige and arrived giggling and enthusiastic. The girls were eager enough and tried their best, but they were young and not all that polished. The crowd of tourists and gamblers was more than polite. The girls gave it their best, but Indian dancing is not for everyone and the crowd was oblivious to the missed steps and poor timing. The 2:30 show went better, and Nora was pleased to see that almost every seat was taken.

When the dance was finished, Nora told the crowd that a free shuttle bus was available to take visitors to the big powwow in Odanah, a two-minute ride away. There were few takers, and the gamblers wandered back inside to give their money to the casino.

On Saturday, Nora had scheduled the Grass Dancers from Bear Hollow. They were a flashy, professional troop. Their regalia and flowing streamers gave the crowd quite a show. Cameras flashed continuously, and the crowd gives the dancers a big hand. Nora caught a glimpse of Mr. Hightower, who gave her a big thumbs-up. She assumed he was pleased with the show.

On Saturday night, the conspirators assembled for one last meeting. That evening, they sat around Ted's kitchen table and went over their plans in great detail. The time for the deed was set to coincide with the 2:30 show. Cell phone numbers were checked and watches were synchronized. Everyone was nervous and hopeful. Suddenly, it seemed as if there were a thousand unresolved issues and in spite of all their planning, it seemed like an awful lot was being left to chance. They tried to buck up each other's courage with gallows humor. The last thing Ron said before the meeting broke up was, "I hope the next time we see each other, it's not behind bars."

The next morning, Sunday, the twenty-first of September, dawned wet and overcast. It threatened rain in the morning, but by midday, the sky was as blue as a painting. This was the busiest day of the weekend for the casino, probably the busiest of the year. The parking lot was filled to overflowing, and inside it looked like



almost every slot machine was taken. The Silver Eagle, too, was getting a good workout.

At one o'clock, in the parking lot pavilion, Robert Big-boy introduced "the La Pointe Braves, who will perform their high-spirited Fancy Dance." It was the early show, and Nora had impressed upon Yellow Moon that this dance was to be performed straight. "This is not the distraction. Just do the regular dance." The distraction was not scheduled until the 2:30 dance. Yellow Moon agreed, and the dancers took their places.

Even Nora was impressed at how fit and marvelous the eight young men looked. Her son Kevin/D'nashta was one of the dancers, and he gave her a shy wave as the dance began. The brave's regalia was outstanding—two big colorful bustles adorned each hip. Every wrist and ankle sported a beautifully bead-worked band. Their dancing was energetic and professional. The crowd responded with applause and cheers at the athletic jumps and twirls.

When the dance ended, the troupe retired to rest up for the next show. Nora was about to visit with her son when the air was disturbed by the whup-whup-whup sound of a helicopter landing in the field nearby.

Out of the helicopter stepped "Big" Carl Huber, Wisconsin's senior senator, his bodyguards, and assistants. Nora watched as Mr. Hightower strode over to greet him, and they disappeared into the casino together. Nora checked her watch. One hour 'til show time.

## CHAPTER 48

At two o'clock, Ed Nightsky walked over to Dominick Albani and asked him if he could spare a security guard to open the maintenance room. Albani rolled his eyes and said, "You gotta be kidding. Are you blind? Don't you see what's going on here? It's a madhouse. Give me a break, Ed. Whatever you have to do, please, do it tomorrow."

Ed wasn't expecting Albani to say no. Without the key, the whole elaborate scheme was dead. Ed thought for a couple of seconds and said, "Okay with me, Dom, but there are four machines that need replacing. On a day like today, you're talking, what, twenty, twenty-five thousand bucks. You want to tell Hightower you cost him that much?"

Ed started to walk away, but Albani stopped him and said, "Okay, Ed, you're right. Go get Mike; tell him I said to get the keys, but make it snappy, will ya?"

Mike went up to Hightower's office, and as soon as he entered, Ricki put her fingers to her lips to keep him quiet. Mike could see that the inner office door was closed. Ricki whispered, "There's an important person in there, and they're not to be disturbed."

Damn, Mike thought. He was ready to call Ron to execute plan B and get Hightower out of there when he realized that Hightower already had an important visitor. He was unlikely to drop everything and run downstairs if Ron called Ricki to say there was a congressman downstairs. He was about to call Nora and abort the mission when the office door opened and Senator Huber walked out. The senator gave Hightower a solid slap on the back and said, "You're a prince among men, Hightower. I really appreciate what you've done for my campaign. I still have a few minutes; what say you take me downstairs and buy me a drink?"

"Sure, Senator, I'd be delighted. Ricki, I'll be in the bar if anyone wants me."

As soon as they left, Ricki motioned Mike to go in and get the key. Mike unlocked the cabinet and took both the maintenance room and Silver Eagle keys off their hooks. Once outside the office, Mike called Ted. When Ted answered, Mike said, "I have it." Ted came out of the surveillance room, and Mike slipped the Silver Eagle key into his pocket. So far, so good.

Ted went back into the surveillance room. He walked over to the wall of video recorders and began putting fresh tapes in some. When he got to the three machines that recorded the video from the Silver Eagle, he put in yesterday's tapes and pressed play. No one noticed that the screen was showing yesterday's crowd. He was about to sign out for lunch when Jim Standinghorse, his boss, slapped him on the shoulder, startling him. Ted dropped a tape on the floor and Standinghorse bent to retrieve it. The tape was clearly marked SE 9/21 and Ted's heart sank as his boss picked it up and handed it back, apparently not even looking at the date. Ted's hand shook as he took the tape from Jim. Jim noticed the nervousness and said in his best George Bush voice, "Relax, Ted, I just wanted to tell you you're doing a heckuva job, a heckuva job." Ted did his best to smile and muttered his thanks. Then, he gathered up his jacket and computer bag and went downstairs to the restaurant. He called Nora to tell her he was in position.

In the meantime, Mike, Ed, and Ralph were in the base-

ment putting a new slot machine on the dolly. It was 2:30. Time for the fun to begin.

In the parking lot pavilion, Robert Bigboy introduced the La Pointe Braves. Word of the spectacular dance had spread and the pavilion was packed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let’s welcome these talented local boys, who will entertain us with an energetic Fancy Dance. Fancy dancing is new to the dance repertoire. It’s fast and energetic, and I’m sure you’re going to like it.” The braves burst upon the stage and received an enthusiastic reception. Nora was surprised to see that the troupe had donned war paint and all of the dancers carried tomahawks and war clubs. They looked more like a war party than a dance troupe. The drum began beating a fast rhythm, and the braves began their leaping dance. They circled a few times, and then Yellow Moon stood and yelled in Ashininabe, “Now is the time, my brothers; go and right our wrongs.”

At Yellow Moon’s signal, all eight Chippewa braves broke out of formation and rushed toward the casino. They pushed past the lone guard at the entrance, and with whoops and yells, they stormed inside. Once inside, they dispersed in every direction, and people immediately began a mad rush for the exits.

Yelling and whooping Indians leaped onto tables, brandishing their weapons. Whole banks of slot machines were overturned. People panicked and trampled each other in their hurry to leave. The security guards were caught by surprise and were swept along in the general rush. Some few guards remained at their posts and did their best to keep things orderly. A few guards helped wounded and bleeding people outside and then rushed back inside for more. Of all the scenarios they had practiced, there was never anything like this. Fistfights broke out in a couple of places. A couple of braves charged into the kitchen and began wreaking havoc. The cooks and wait staff fled for their lives. A grease fire started and quickly spread. Soon, the fire alarm added its sound to the general confusion, the fire set off the sprinkler system, and the building

began to fill with water and smoke.

In the bar, Senator Huber's bodyguard was trying to protect the senator from an assault by a trio of frenzied Indians. The senator and Hightower hid behind an overturned table as the Indians hurled bottles, glasses, and the contents of the dessert cart at them. With a lucky shot, one of the braves hit the senator in the face with a chocolate cream pie. Somehow, a photograph of the senator cowering in fear, dripping whipped cream and pudding, found its way onto the Internet. That photograph played a large role in his election defeat later that year.

Amidst the noise, smoke, and confusion, Ted made his way to the Silver Eagle. The last of the panicked gamblers streamed past. No one paid Ted the slightest notice. He took out the key and opened the back of the big silver machine. Quickly, he attached a cable from his laptop to the Eagle's access port.

Ted took out his cell phone and speed-dialed Ron in the pavilion outside. When Ron answered, Ted said "Now." Ron was ready and with a flick of his wrist, tipped over a large paper cup of ice water he had sitting atop a stack of electronics. The soundboard sparked, and the lights flickered and went out. Ed saw the lights blink and go out. He flicked the main breaker off and then on again before restoring power to the pavilion.

Upstairs, Ted sat behind the Silver Eagle, his finger poised to push enter on his computer. When the lights blinked and came on again, he pushed the button, and the Silver Eagle rebooted with the hacked program. Then, he closed up the machine and joined the confused and unhappy throng outside. The whole operation took less than five minutes, and no one saw a thing. The renegades had done the impossible.

Mike came up from the basement and witnessed a scene of utter chaos. He could not believe his eyes. He saw people in fistfights and painted Indians hacking up the gaming tables with hatchets and beating on slot machines with clubs. He could not believe the amount of destruction wrought in so short a time. The air was thick with smoke and underfoot was a soggy mélange of

broken glass, soggy carpet, playing cards, and poker chips.

Rows of slot machines were pushed over and smashed. At least three braves were in custody and were handcuffed to a pole. A couple of braves were tearing up the carpet while another was trying to set it alight. Mike knew that somewhere, something was burning, because he could hear the screaming of fire alarms. To add to the chaos, a steady rain from the sprinklers was making a soggy mess of what the Indians hadn't ruined.

Mike was stunned and repelled by what he had seen and staggered outside to look for Ted. He found him standing speechless with Nora and Ron. He joined them and reported what he just saw. "Did you tell Yellow Moon distraction or destruction?" Mike asked Nora as he took the Silver Eagle key from Ted and slipped it into his pocket.

After a few minutes, the Ashland police and fire department arrived on the scene. The remaining Indians climbed through smashed windows and ran into the woods, a dozen cops and security guards in hot pursuit. The melee was over. The Silver Eagle was primed and ready, but the casino was a soggy, smoldering mess and not surprisingly, closed until further notice.

Rhoda, who had driven Dancing Bear to the casino for the big forty-seventh pull of the lever, looked at the smoking wreck of the casino and felt sick. What had they done? The casino was a wreck; it might never re-open. The fire trucks unloaded their hoses. A wet and bedraggled Hightower tried to console an angry and embarrassed Senator Huber, to no avail. The very plan that was to liberate the reservation had caused its demise. Rhoda looked at the crowd of now-unemployed Indians milling around outside the casino and shook her head in dismay. She drove out of the parking lot and took her grandmother home. Already, the media trucks were arriving. If nothing else, the attack on the casino would be national news for a few days. She could only hope that some good would come out of all the attention.

Not much good did come of it. The news stories were generally sensational and wound up embarrassing the tribe. The

reporters failed to cover the underlying injustice that drove the Indians to such an extreme act of violence. It was generally treated as a bizarre aberration by a bunch of unhappy Indian Luddites. Rhoda felt stupid and sad. She took Dancing Bear home and went to her room.

Bill called Rhoda when he heard the news. He couldn't believe it when she confessed that she was partially responsible for the mess.

"How could this be your fault? The newspapers are calling it an Indian uprising. Wait, I have the article right here. It says that a band of fifteen to twenty young Indian men invaded the casino at Bad River and trashed the place. You weren't one of those young men, were you?"

"No, of course not. And there were only eight of them. But they were there because of me and a few friends. Those young men seem to have had their own agenda, which conflicted with ours."

"You had an agenda that involved eight armed Indians?" asked an incredulous Bill. "The paper said that someone named Yellow Moon filled these kids' heads with ideas of revenge and righting old wrongs."

Rhoda said, "Right, that was their agenda. Ours was a lot more practical and down to earth. We just wanted to rob the place." With a sigh, Rhoda told Bill about the elaborate scheme to get the Silver Eagle money. "And you want to know the real irony of the whole thing? We came within a whisker of succeeding. If only those kids would have behaved themselves, everything would have gone as planned. But as it stands now, we don't have a thing, no money, no jobs, no future. I can't believe I've done it again, Bill. I acted impulsively and wound up hurting people."

"It's the law of unintended consequences," said Bill. "At least you're not behind bars for fraud, grand larceny and a half a dozen other federal and state charges. I'm surprised at you, Rhoda."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. We did have

lofty goals. Well, it's a fine mess now and thanks to me and my friends, we've managed to make our tribe's situation worse than it was," Rhoda said.

The next day, Rhoda signed on to the public computer at the library and checked her e-mail. There was a message from Toshi, short and to the point—"Well, how did it go?"

Rhoda wrote him the whole sad tale and thanked them all for doing their part so professionally and so well. She touched on the current state of affairs, the loss of jobs, and the big stupid building that now stood there closed and untouchable, a white elephant. And the big Silver Eagle slot machine, primed and ready, still sitting there, mocking them from the lobby.

After a couple of weeks of negotiations, the insurance company settled with the Phoenix Corporation for an undisclosed amount. That amount was rumored to be around ten million dollars. The settlement included damages to the building and, ironically, lost revenue for the three months the insurance company estimated it would take to repair the place. The Phoenix Corporation failed to disclose that three months was two months longer than they intended to be open. It irked the conspirators no end that the hated corporation would be the only one to benefit from the fiasco.

The corporation publicly announced its decision not to reopen the Bad River Casino, citing poor performance, low profitability, and fittingly enough, bad community relations. But in an extravagant gesture of good will and good public relations, the corporation sold its interest in the empty building to the tribe for one dollar. It also agreed not to press charges against Yellow Moon and the three captured young Indian invaders. Nora put the article in her file along with a photo of a smiling Hightower handing over the ruined building to the befuddled tribal council.

On the very day D'nashta and his two friends were released from the county lockup, the Ashland police picked up a dirty, bearded stranger, disoriented and lost on the street. At first, the man was thought to be homeless and mentally ill. But after clean-



ing him up and feeding him a hot meal, the Ashland authorities learned he was the long-lost Father Fitsimmons, the child-molesting Catholic priest from Odanah who was thought to have been murdered. Father Fitsimmons told a harrowing tale of abduction, abandonment, and eventual escape. He was left on an island far from shore. He had food but no means of escape. After several weeks, he finally managed to build a crude raft and paddled to the mainland. He was outraged and demanded justice. The justice he received was not what he expected. The tribal council, reacting to pressure from the community, found the backbone to press charges against the man and his bishop, who had turned a blind eye on his long history of abuse. Father Fitsimmons was defrocked and indicted as a pedophile. The lawsuit promised some monetary relief for the families of the children that suffered but would do little for the community as a whole.

In the derelict casino, there was nothing but rubble and ruin. Kicking through the debris, Nora and Rhoda talked about possible uses for the damaged building. The interior was a soggy, smoke-damaged mess, but the huge space was still structurally sound. The Phoenix Corporation had salvaged everything still remotely usable. The building was little more than an empty shell. The real damage was to the local economy. Several hundred people were out of work. Also suffering were the relations between the City of Ashland and the reservation. Most of the casino's employees were white residents of the city, and they blamed the loss of their livelihoods on the bad behavior of the Indians.

Joe Twotrees and the tribal council were all for finding another deep-pocket sponsor to rebuild the casino. The reservation traditionalists pointed out how little the tribe received from that arrangement and argued that the building might be better used for other purposes. It was the same old argument, and just as before, it went round and round.

Nora pleaded her case one morning in Joe's office. "Joe, I'm begging you to try and think creatively. You know the reser-

vation was robbed of millions by Phoenix. We should have had a school and a clinic by now, at the very minimum. You know that these casino operators are all thieves. You know that's how it works."

"I know nothing of the sort," snarled Twotrees. "What I do know is that you and your friends have fought to keep this tribe in the eighteenth century. I wouldn't be surprised if your bunch was behind all the vandalism and this latest attack. So here we are without the casino. Do you think we're better off?"

"You know that's not true, Joe," protested Nora. "Yes, I was against the building of the casino in the beginning, but I've come to terms with it. My husband worked there, for God's sake. I'm angry that we had to align ourselves with a pack of thieves like Phoenix. All we're asking is for a fairer share of the profits and a little more transparent accounting. How about a tribal member on the casino board?"

"Well, whatever your politics, I can assure you the majority of the tribe wants to see the casino rebuilt. This casino gave a lot of people jobs, and those jobs were important for this community."

And so the arguments went back and forth. Nora and the traditionals proposed a mixed use for the building, maybe using some of the space for a school and a clinic.

Twotrees didn't like the idea and wondered where the money would come from for the conversion. "It's a hotel and a casino, Nora, for God's sake. How are you going to convert a casino into a school?"

Nora had no good answer for that. There wasn't any money and no prospect for getting any. Their only consolation was that the casino was going to close its doors, anyway. Otherwise, they couldn't live with the shame of what they'd done.

The law of unintended consequences that Bill so rightly pointed out does not stop working after its first unintended result. Like ripples on a pond, actions cause other actions, and consequences keep on piling up. The results make reality what it is—an

unpredictable series of causes and effects that alter the universe. The unintended consequences go on forever.

While the arguments raged on the reservation, the Phoenix Corporation calmly and methodically went on about its business. And that business was building casinos and skimming their profits. In the months following the Bad River fiasco, Phoenix opened a brand new casino on a reservation in southern Wisconsin and bought a controlling interest in another one in Minnesota.

Rhoda and Bill made plans for a life together. They planned a wedding in the spring and got together whenever they could. On the reservation, the traditionals went back to making do, as they always had. No casino operators expressed any interest in the Bad River building. Word of the hostile Indians had gotten out into the business community, and no company wanted any part of that can of worms. Twotrees was furious, but there was nothing he could do. His gravy train was derailed. His half-built mansion on the outskirts of Ashland was foreclosed.

The winter set in cold and brutal. Rhoda ran into Nora or Ron every now and again. They shared a laugh and a sigh and thought about what might have been, and then they shrugged and went their separate ways. It was obvious that they had failed and the tribe's future looked bleaker than ever.

On the day before Christmas, Rhoda was called downstairs by Dancing Bear. "There's someone at the door for you." Rhoda opened the door to see Evelyn Stone, her old college roommate, standing on the stoop, holding a suitcase and hopping from foot to foot to generate some warmth. It was a freezing cold morning, and Evelyn was making ghosts with her breath. Rhoda whooped for joy and threw her arms around her. The two women jumped around, squealing like teenagers. When they calmed down, Rhoda invited Evelyn inside. They sat at the kitchen table and chattered about this and that while Rhoda bustled about making coffee. When they were settled with their steaming cups, Rhoda asked how Evelyn found her.

"My ex-husband's a hacker, remember? He can find any-

one. In fact, I'm here because he asked me to deliver this to you." Evelyn heaved the suitcase she'd been carrying onto the table and opened it. The suitcase was filled with neat stacks of hundred-dollar bills. Rhoda was speechless.

"You should see the look on your face. God, I wish I had a camera. Well, you're no doubt wondering what this is all about. Well this is four million five hundred and sixty-some-odd thousand dollars, and it represents your share of the Silver Eagle jackpot. Toshi says to tell you that he's sorry, but Little Wind incurred some extraordinary expenses and had to take a cut."

A still-flabbergasted Rhoda managed to stammer, "But, but ... Evelyn, I don't ..."

"Well, the way it was explained to me, and correct me if I'm wrong, you and Little Wind were going to pull a fast one on the casino up here. Little Wind was going to fix the slot machine computer so you guys would score the big jackpot and use the money to do good things, blah, blah. Am I right so far?"

"Yes. That's what was supposed to happen," Rhoda said.

"Well, when it didn't work out like you planned, and what ever does, Toshi and the boys kept an eye on the Silver Eagle, I guess through the computer they hacked into originally; I'm not too clear about the technicalities. Anyway, they found out that the Silver Eagle was being installed in another casino the company just bought on the Jepson Creek Reservation in Minnesota. Talk about the middle of nowhere.

"Anyway, Toshi told me the Silver Eagle was going to be installed in this new casino, and if I wanted to make some quick money, I should get my ass over there before they opened the doors and be sure I was the first in line. So, I get there a couple of days before the grand opening and I hang around waiting until they open for business. Even with all that waiting, I almost blew it. Somehow, I wind up third on line for the new machine and the two guys ahead of me kept playing and playing. Toshi told me the thing was set to pay off on the forty-seventh pull, so I turn on all my charm, bat my eyes, and tell the guy ahead of me that I've been

waiting for two days and I have a plane to catch and would he be a sweetheart and let a lady have a turn?

“Well, he turns out to be this nice guy from Albuquerque, and he lets me go ahead of him. The first guy finishes his turn and it’s me and the Eagle. On my third pull, all hell breaks loose, lights started flashing, sirens screaming. I’m screaming. Even the guy from Albuquerque is screaming. Of course he stopped being so happy when he realized that it could have been him collecting the jackpot if he wasn’t so courteous.

“Anyway, the jackpot was for a little over five million bucks. The casino wrote me a check, and I drove into Minneapolis and cashed it that very day. Boy, was that bank unhappy.

“Toshi figured Little Wind needed to take a few bucks to pay me and because they did more work than originally contracted for. The rest is yours. I’m taking Toshi Little Wind’s share tomorrow. So, I really do have a plane to catch. But I’m so happy to see you again, and I’m happy to bring you this money, and thanks to you, I’m really happy about going back to Japan to see my man. So give me a kiss and wish me luck. I really do have to run. Be sure to stay in touch and let me know what all this money buys. Oh, and Merry Christmas.”

And with that, Evelyn was out the door and gone. If it wasn’t for the suitcase full of cash on the kitchen table, Rhoda would never have believed it happened at all.

## CHAPTER 49

Nora, Rhoda, and Ron were sitting in Joe Twotrees' office. They represented the newly formed Bad River Improvement Society (BRIS), and they had come to pitch their plan to the tribal council, a plan to get the reservation and the local economy back on its feet.

The plan was the brainchild of many hours of heated, often passionate, discussion around one kitchen table or another. The problem was how best to spend the four and a half million dollars in a way that benefited the most people. At first, everyone was for spending the money to build a new school and a clinic. But after a local contractor showed them how little four million dollars would buy, they realized they needed to come up with something more sustainable. Gradually, they came around to the realization that reviving the old casino just might be the best solution.

"We could probably get it fixed up and furnished with the money we have," said Ron.

"And putting all those people back to work would have instant benefits for the whole community," chimed in Ed.

"If our committee could keep control of the finances," added Rhoda, "and used the income from the casino to build the things we need, we'd have enough money to do it right."

On and on the discussions went. One good idea followed another. With the casino up and running, millions of dollars would wash into the community in the form of salaries and profits. It seemed like the best solution, and the committee threw itself into making it happen. Now, three weeks after winning the money, Rhoda, Nora, and Richard were sitting in Twotrees' office and pitching the idea to him.

Nora spoke for the group. "We estimate repairs to the casino and refurbishing it with new and rebuilt slot machines will cost two point six million, tops. The hotel was untouched in the fracas, and the damage to the casino was mostly cosmetic. If we put another two million to bankroll the casino and cover salaries for the first couple of months, we think we could be up and running by May first. If everything goes as planned, we'll have the only Indian-owned and Indian-run casino in the country. We'll set up a commission to use the income for projects on the reservation. With a cash stream conservatively estimated at five million dollars a year, we could turn Bad River into a model of social progress. When we're through building, we could discuss direct cash disbursements to the community. It's your classic win-win situation. So what does the council think? We'd like to get started contracting, hiring, and training as soon as possible."

Twotrees wasn't happy about the arrangement, but what could he do? He thought about the angles. With all that money flowing through the reservation, there would always be a need for a politically savvy person. There might not be a fat envelope at the end of each month, but there was more than one way to skin a muskrat. A sharp operator like him would always find a way to make a buck. Nora and her bunch of idealists had no idea what they were up against.

So behind closed doors, Twotrees told the council, "In a few months they'll come begging for help getting the state pols to grant them a license. I tell you, my friends, if we're patient and play our cards right, this whole project just might fall into our laps."

The council didn't take long to make up its collective mind. After a half-hour they voted unanimously to back Nora and the Bad River Improvement Society. Twotrees invited the committee members into his chambers. "I don't know where you got the money for this, and I don't want to know. We're in the awkward position of either going along with you or looking like impotent fools. So, you have our approval. Let's get to work."

In the days that followed, a new corporation was created and a board of directors formed. Two members of the tribal council were appointed to the five-member board. Nora was elected chairwoman. Rhoda was appointed treasurer, and Ron Blackbird became the board vice president and secretary. With the board's offices firmly in the hands of the pro-reservation traditionalists, it seemed like there was no opportunity for the old graft and bribery methods to continue.

Committees were formed to oversee construction and the hiring of staff. Charley and some other dealers opened a training program to bring more local youth into the better paying jobs on the casino floor. Hundreds of slot machines were purchased secondhand, and with Ted's help, they were reprogrammed and set to pay out at the highest rate state law allowed.

Many key posts like casino manager and hotel manager were filled from junior staff. Jim Standinghorse agreed to come back as surveillance room supervisor and spent a few intense weeks training a new crew.

Rhoda hoped that Bill might be a good fit for head of casino security and asked him up for an interview. Bill wasn't right for that job; he knew next to nothing about casino security. But while in Ashland, he interviewed for a position with the Ashland Police Department. They were looking to replace their retiring chief of detectives. Bill impressed the city council with his long experience in law enforcement and his genial manner. He was just the kind of person they were looking for, so they made an offer and he accepted the position. He was to start his new job in April.

Rhoda showed Bill around the casino. It was a beehive of



activity with carpenters and painters putting the bar back together and new carpet being laid. Bill watched Charley's dealer class go through its paces. Rhoda was happy and excited. She looked more hopeful and more beautiful than ever. Bill thought the casino looked good, too.

The winter flew by. Everything was on schedule for a May first opening. Best of all, the Bad River Casino was getting a load of national publicity, and excitement was running high. Ashland once again embraced her Chippewa neighbors. The casino employed hundreds of locals. Mike got Albani's old job as floor manager. A new head of security was found and hired. Ted was promoted to chief technology guru. It was essentially the same job he always had, but it was all he wanted. Ed and Ralph put on their old work shirts and went back to their custodial duties. Ricki Rice landed a job behind the hotel desk, where her beauty and charm were put to good use.

After a tough winter, D'nashta/Kevin paddled home for the last time and announced to his parents that he wanted to study political science and get involved with the environmental movement. He changed into street clothes and became Kevin Nightsky fulltime. Binay was never heard of again.

Bill and Rhoda's wedding was held on the reservation on a promontory overlooking the lake. It was a day as perfect as only a perfect day in May could be. There were a couple of hundred people assembled for the ceremony and the party to follow. The whole crew from Oconee was there, in addition to almost everyone connected with the casino. Harvey and Cantress brought the twins. Harvey, now Oconee's chief of police, served as best man. The wedding became the new casino's housewarming party and was by any measure a great success. A Catholic priest from Ashland and Dancing Bear took turns marrying the happy couple. It was a party to remember. A wiisini to end all wiisinis.

After the reception, it was time to settle down and get to

work. Bill and Rhoda rented an apartment in Ashland, and Bill settled in to his new job. Rhoda put on the uniform of the Bad River Natural Resources Council, where she had taken a position as wildlife biologist. Her uniform consisted of jeans, hiking boots, and a khaki shirt with the tribal seal on the shoulder. No guns, no bad guys. Just fish, deer, and ten million birds.

THE END

[1] CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

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